

# The low-pay, no-pay cycle

## Understanding recurrent poverty

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**This report examines how and why people become trapped in a long-term cycle of low-paid jobs and unemployment (i.e. the ‘low-pay, no-pay’ cycle).**

Little is known about people’s repeated movements into and out of poverty over the course of their lives and, in particular, how this ‘recurrent poverty’ links to the low-pay, no-pay cycle and broader experiences of disadvantage. Based on detailed qualitative research in deprived neighbourhoods, the report explores these issues.

The report:

- examines the relationships between personal, family and labour market factors in explaining the low-pay, no-pay cycle;
- documents experiences of everyday hardship and recurrent poverty amongst individuals with strong work motivation and repeated episodes in employment; and
- outlines a series of policy measures to tackle the problems of the low-pay, no-pay cycle.



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## Introduction: ‘recurrent poverty’, ‘poor work’ and the ‘low-pay, no-pay cycle’

Drawing on and extending a series of related, long-term studies in the same locality, this study seeks to understand the dynamics of poverty and marginal work across the life-course. Using detailed qualitative interviews with employers, support agencies and, most importantly, people in mid- to later working life, our intention was to examine the relationship between low-paid, insecure ‘poor work’, unemployment and the recurrence of poverty. Within this broad aim, we were particularly keen to see whether employment lifts people out of poverty and whether the wider disadvantages experienced by people living in deprived neighbourhoods act as barriers to labour market participation and progress.

## ‘Low-pay, no-pay’: work motivations, education and getting jobs

A key finding points to the resilience and lasting work commitment shown by our interviewees, despite the frustrations and setbacks associated with their repeated periods of unemployment and low-paid jobs. It would not be an overstatement to say that most deplored claiming welfare benefits. Some avoided making claims altogether, or at least for as long as they possibly could. This strong work attachment was learnt across generations. Interviewees were aware of the social and psychological benefits of a job, and of the personal negative consequences of being unemployed.

In the main, our participants were relatively low qualified but had positive attitudes towards gaining further training and skills and this helped some people into jobs. A very significant finding of the study was, however, that *overall*, for these interviewees, levels of educational attainment did *not* predict improved labour market fortunes. Even the best qualified – those with degrees and diplomas – participated, at least at times, in ‘low-pay, no-pay’ churning labour market careers in the same ways as the least qualified.

Contrary to the widely held view that ‘employment is the best route out of poverty’, the sorts of work available to our interviewees kept them in poverty rather than lifting them out of it. The pattern of low-paid and insecure jobs that recurrently returned young adults to unemployment found in our *earlier* studies had not changed. The same individuals, now aged 30 to 40, still contend with the same vicious circle. Moreover, interviews with older people (aged 40 to 60) showed that these patterns of marginal work are often long-term, stretching across generations. The study found that individuals and households would repeatedly experience poverty both when in work and when out of it. The poorly supported transition period between work and benefits, and vice versa, would often bring additional hardship. The support offered by statutory and voluntary sector agencies to help people cycling between low-paid jobs and periods of unemployment was limited, patchy and sometimes unhelpful; especially for those who typically experience relatively short periods of unemployment. Some simply chose to avoid benefits altogether, using small savings or loans to tide them over in between jobs. We describe people who did not claim benefits and who lacked support into employment as ‘the missing workless’. Most appreciation was shown for specialist agencies that put greater emphasis on moving people to longer-lasting employment. There was, however, much use of but little regard for private employment agencies that tie individuals into low-level, low-paid and insecure work.

Independently of agency support, some interviewees had built informal work-related networks over many years, although the recession had blunted these ways of getting jobs. The net result for most,

whether they were using agencies or informal methods, was entry to low-paid jobs. The forms of poor work accessed by these methods did not appear to discriminate against interviewees on the basis of their educational qualifications, skill levels, work history or, in some cases, criminal records.

## **‘Low-pay, no-pay’: insecurity, churning and wider disadvantage**

In the area studied, better-quality jobs had gradually been replaced with low-skilled, low-paid and insecure employment. The same interviewees who described the positive benefits of work in general could also describe the unpleasantness, injustices and hardships of particular low-quality jobs they had done. In the few instances when our interviewees had accessed better-quality jobs, these tended to be with voluntary sector employers who had social as well as commercial goals. The insecurity of poor work underscored the insecurity of our interviewees’ working lives and was the key explanation for why their employment did not last.

The subjects of our research were predominantly willing and able to work and were restricted only occasionally in their ability to do so by wider experiences of disadvantage, such as ill health, bereavement and having to care for others. These experiences also played a part in their explanations of why they lost and left employment. Ill health and depression were in part influenced by insecure employment and unemployment, and could then in turn inhibit further employment. Mothers often found they had to choose between fulfilling family caring duties and remaining in employment. Similarly, attempts to improve job prospects through education and training were often thwarted by caring responsibilities. For others, childcare programmes such as Sure Start led to increased opportunities and positive experiences. A less commonly reported finding, which came from our study, was that the demands of caring for drug-dependent children could also seriously inhibit engagement by parents and grandparents with employment. These sorts of contingencies and critical events that interrupt work commitment are likely to be more common in deprived neighbourhoods than more generally. People simply did not have the resources to cope easily when things go wrong. The capacity to do and sustain work cannot be separated from household economies or situations.

## **Poverty across working lives**

The predominant experience of our interviewees was of recurrent poverty – of moving in and out of low-paying jobs but never moving far from poverty. Even occasional ‘escapes’ from poverty were temporary, reflecting the insecurity of the jobs they got; our interviewees usually did not move far above the poverty line, reflecting the low-paid employment most accessed. Many of those we judged to have moved above the poverty line when they accessed low-paid employment carried with them significant debts which undermined the potential gains of waged employment. A small number had bought their house from the council. As owner-occupiers they were unable to receive sufficient help towards mortgage payments when they were unemployed. People in this situation sometimes seemed to face deep hardship and what might be described as extreme poverty. Welfare benefit payments do not take into account debts that people may have to pay out from benefits. Sometimes our interviewees found that they incurred debts by the process of going to work. This was especially the case where jobs did not last as long as they were told they would, as was often the case with private employment agencies. Debts shadowed the lives of research participants, when they were in jobs and when they were unemployed.

We found little evidence that the ‘safety net’ provided by benefits (in that rent was paid and some income at least was guaranteed) was a major barrier to the unemployed seeking jobs. Indeed, many participants were resistant to claiming welfare benefits and the welfare system was experienced as slow, inefficient and demeaning. It did not provide social security for these interviewees.

People were keen to stress that they budgeted properly, managed well on what they had and that they coped. Most interviewees did not describe themselves as poor, preferring to stress the normality

of their situation and their ability to manage and get by. They compared their lives with others they knew nearby in similar circumstances to themselves. In contrast to what they regarded as their own and the situations of people like them, poverty was explained with negative stereotypes that emphasised the personal culpability of 'the poor'. A sense of pride at getting by and coping in adversity was clung to in opposition to the stigma and shame that still attach to the words 'poverty' and 'the poor'.

## Conclusions

With only few exceptions, the defining features of the lives of our interviewees were poverty and economic marginality. Their economic marginality is demonstrated in their relegation to churning low-pay, no-pay careers at the bottom of the labour market. The effect of this marginality was widespread and lasting experience of poverty, over working lives. For us, the most disturbing aspect of our findings is that this occurs among people who possess strong, resilient work motivation and who have repeatedly engaged with work. An inescapable conclusion is that necessity, along with people's willingness to work – their acceptance of poor work – drives its offer and continuation, trapping individuals in vulnerability and insecurity.

Turning to implications for policy, two recommendations are highlighted. The first concurs with the policy conclusions of the other studies in the JRF programme of research on recurrent poverty: to improve the quality and pay of poor work, particularly retention and advancement in employment, and increasing the National Minimum Wage (NMW). The second is brought to light most by our study rather than the programme as a whole. This is to give greater attention to the needs of the recurrently, short-term unemployed workers – 'the missing workless' – who sometimes do not register for unemployment benefits and often lack the help that might enable them to access better-quality and sustained employment.

This study is about the lives of people living in some of the most deprived wards in England. Using detailed qualitative interviews, and extending a series of related, long-term studies in the same locality, it seeks to understand ‘from the inside’ the dynamics of poverty and marginal work across the life-course.

Following this introduction, Chapter 1 describes the typical sort of ‘low-pay, no-pay’ work history of the people to whom we talked, with particular focus on work motivations and access to jobs. Chapter 2 seeks to explain the insecurity that typified churning employment careers and the reasons people left jobs. Chapter 3 shows how the twists and turns of labour market churning generated a predominant experience of recurrent poverty and everyday hardship. Chapter 4 summarises our key findings and presents our policy conclusions.

## ‘Recurrent poverty’, ‘poor work’ and the ‘low-pay, no-pay’ cycle

As part of greater attention to dynamic, life-course approaches to understanding poverty, research has engaged with the concept of ‘recurrent poverty’ (Smith and Middleton, 2007; Devicienti, 2000). Substantial sections of the UK population never dip under established, objectively defined but arbitrary ‘poverty lines’. At the other end of spectrum are those that are ‘permanently poor’. Some will have one-off experiences of poverty or, alternatively, have a transient, short-term escape from it. Of significance, however, to the JRF programme of research in which our project sits, are those individuals and households who have *repeated* encounters with poverty across the life-course. The ‘recurrently poor’ are those whose fluctuations in income over time swing them above and below the official poverty line (but who probably never move far away from it). Tomlinson and Walker (2010:11) find that ‘recurrent poverty’ affects ‘around 5–7 per cent of the population as a whole ... representing around a fifth of all poverty experience’. As with the JRF programme, our project shares a dual aim of thinking about the value of the concept of ‘recurrent poverty’ and uncovering *empirically* the processes that might lead to personal and household experiences of it.

That ‘employment is the best route out of poverty’ has been a defining mantra of the recent UK Labour government and opposition party policy. Income from employment ought to lift individuals and their dependants away from poverty. A range of tax credits and other incentives has been introduced to try to ensure that ‘work pays’ and that people will not be ‘better off on benefits’. Thus, recurrent poverty might well reflect individuals’ intermittent engagement with employment. Accessing a job lifts someone away from poverty, losing a job drops them back into it, with rises and falls in income mirroring entries into and exits from the labour market. Here the significance of the low-pay, no-pay cycle – a longitudinal pattern of employment instability and movement between low-paid jobs and benefits – is obvious. This pattern of ‘churning’ is particularly associated with ‘poor work’: low-quality, insecure employment that fails to provide labour market security or progress. Poor work and economic marginality – rather than either regular employment or permanent unemployment – is said to have become more common in recent decades for larger numbers of workers at the bottom of the labour market (Byrne, 1999; McKnight, 2002).

Indeed, this was a key conclusion from our previous studies on Teesside. A series of projects (Johnston *et al.*, 2000; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Webster *et al.*, 2004) explored qualitatively, longitudinally and broadly young people’s transitions to adulthood in contexts of multiple deprivation. Regardless of variation in other aspects of their lives (e.g. in terms of parenthood or housing situation), economic marginality was the preserve of virtually all. Young adults shared a long-term employment



history comprised of churning, non-progressive movement around low-level jobs, training places and ‘the dole’. Only a handful had more secure labour market transitions; their relative success rested largely on contingency (e.g. a chance job with a ‘good employer’) rather than individual characteristics (e.g. job motivation or skill level).

Drawing on these previous studies and the challenges set by the wider JRF programme, our prime aim was to examine the relationship between poor work, the low-pay, no-pay cycle and recurrent poverty. We did this from the perspectives of employers, support agencies and – most importantly – people in the middle of their working lives. Within this broad aim, we were keen to see how the wider experiences of disadvantage that bear down on people living in deprived neighbourhoods might intersect with unstable employment histories and poverty, acting as barriers to labour market participation and progress.

## The research site

Middlesbrough, the main town of Teesside and where this research was undertaken, was renowned for the rapid development of its steel, chemical and heavy engineering industries from the mid-19th century, and ensuing relative prosperity. The scope and speed of Teesside’s economic collapse was equally dramatic (Foord *et al.*, 1985). In 1965 the unemployment rate in Middlesbrough stood at less than 2 per cent. By 1987 it had reached over 21 per cent. Close to 100,000 manufacturing jobs were lost in Teesside between 1971 and 2008, which were gradually replaced by 92,000 jobs in the service sector (particularly in call centres, leisure services and the public sector). Jobs became less ‘masculine’ and less likely to be full time and permanent. They also became relatively less well paid. Gross Value Added (GVA) statistics are a key indicator of the wealth of an area, reflecting its industrial and occupational structure, levels of employment and unemployment, company profitability and earnings. In the early 1970s GVA in Teesside was above the national average (and third highest in the country). Recent figures show that Teesside’s GVA is now only 75 per cent of the national average, reflecting in part the replacement of relatively skilled, well-paid production employment with relatively less skilled, lower-paid service jobs (Tees Valley Unlimited, 2010a).

By the end of the 1990s, when our first studies of young adults and social exclusion commenced, Teesside had still not recovered from the structural decline of the local economy and, over the past thirty years, Middlesbrough has typically had significantly higher unemployment rates than the national average.

As can be seen from Table 1, between our early studies and the commencement of this one in 2008, there was some socio-economic improvement locally, reflecting an economic upturn nationally. By the time we wrote the proposal for this study in 2007, claimant unemployment in Middlesbrough had fallen to 5.2 per cent from 7.0 per cent in 2001. Our fieldwork period coincided, however, with the onset of national recession with local unemployment rising significantly again (see TVJSU, 2010 for all statistics). In February 2010, Corus (the Indian-owned inheritor of many of the previously nationalised British Steel foundries) closed its remaining Teesside plant with the loss of 1,400 jobs. The problems of local unemployment can also be illustrated by the numbers of notified vacancies available for the unemployed. In April 2010 there were approximately 17 unemployed people for every notified vacancy job in Middlesbrough. Nationally

**Table 1: Unemployment in Middlesbrough and nationally during the 2000s, per cent (claimant count, figures at February each year)**

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Middlesbrough	7.0	6.2	5.9	5.3	4.7	4.9	5.2	5.0	6.7	8.1
GB	2.9	2.8	2.7	2.6	2.4	2.6	2.6	2.2	3.8	4.3

Source: TVJSU, May 2010: ‘Unemployment, worklessness and vacancies in the Tees Valley’.

the comparative figure was 6.2 unemployed people for every notified job vacancy (Tees Valley Unlimited, 2010b).

### **The research neighbourhoods**

The two neighbourhoods used for our research, the same as for our previous studies, remain very deprived ones. Both are in many ways typical of UK estates of social housing built in the mid-twentieth century to house working-class families as the result of 'slum clearance' in inner-urban areas. One was built as a 'garden suburb' not far from the town centre. The other is a larger locale of five interlinked estates on the outskirts of town, and was constructed originally to house skilled workers in nearby heavy industry and their families. Both are predominantly white, working-class areas (circa 98 per cent White British) with relatively high levels of population stability.

Whilst originally popular places to live, the wards of our research neighbourhoods all now feature in the top 150 most deprived wards out of 7,094 in England, i.e. in the top 3 per cent most deprived in the country. Worklessness and the necessity of claiming various benefits are very widespread. For instance, in January 2009, one ward had a worklessness rate of 53 per cent, twice the national average of 26.1 per cent (and 37 per cent for the town of Middlesbrough). Some 36.6 per cent of its working age residents were in receipt of key out of work benefits (compared with a town average of 20.4 per cent and a national average of 11.9 per cent).

Clearly, then, these are places that provide an opportunity to investigate how disadvantage, working life and poverty interrelate. We acknowledge that the study's findings cannot be generalised to all poor neighbourhoods or all of those in recurrent poverty. Nevertheless, there are many places that are not dissimilar to these neighbourhoods in the post-industrial conurbations of the UK, and we suspect the stories we tell from Teesside will be recognised more widely.

### **Research design & participants**

The fieldwork comprised three elements:

- Semi-structured interviews (n=10) with local employers
- Semi-structured interviews (n=13) with agencies who support local workless people into jobs
- Biographically focused, qualitative interviews with local residents (aged 30 to 60 years) engaged in the low-pay, no-pay cycle:
  - o half (n=30), aged 30–40 years, were interviewed as young adults in our previous Teesside studies
  - o half (n=30), aged 40–60 years, were new interviewees.

#### **Employer and agency interviews**

The research with local employers and practitioners was undertaken to gain their perspectives on our key research questions. For reasons of space, and because we have chosen to prioritise our findings from the main fieldwork with local residents, discussion of this element of the research is presented in the Appendix.

#### **Interviews with those engaged in the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle'**

This was the main element of our research. The theoretical aim of following up the longer-term transitions of young adults from our earlier Teesside studies proved to be challenging, in terms of sample recruitment. We were interested in whether the low-pay, no-pay cycle extended into their mid-working lives and, if so, how it was experienced.

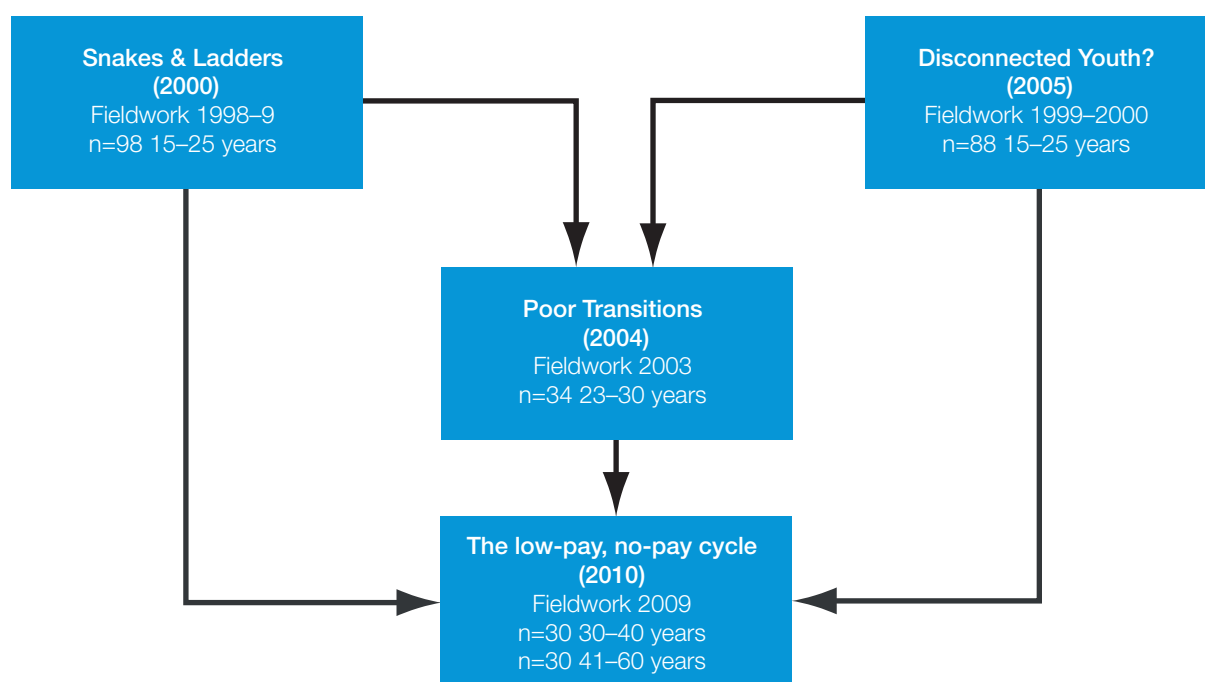
We identified from our previous combined samples of 186 people (for the *Snakes and Ladders* and *Disconnected Youth?* studies) those now aged over 30 years and who, at previous contact, had had the predominant labour market ‘churning’ experience of the earlier studies (see Figure 1). We were also keen to include equal numbers of men and women. If interviewees had also been included amongst the 34 followed up in *Poor Transitions*, in their mid- to late 20s, this would give three waves of interview over a 10-year period (four in some cases, because *Disconnected Youth?* interviewed many participants twice). Using previous contact details, the electoral register, neighbourhood contacts and the Facebook social networking site, we constructed a sample of re-interviewees. There were several people that we could not find and a small handful who did not wish to participate again.

With the sub-sample of 30 new interviewees, aged 40–60 years, we wanted to understand low-pay, no-pay in mid to late working life. We did not have a previous contact list to help us, so we began with recommendations from agencies we interviewed. The majority of these, however, worked mostly with the longer-term jobless and were less able to identify clients with *recurrent* patterns of jobs and unemployment.

Advertising in local newsletters and putting posters in shop windows, church halls, libraries and schools, to our surprise generated some interviewees (this had not worked well as a recruitment strategy in our earlier studies and other research with socially excluded groups has found the same; Sixsmith *et al.*, 2003). The £20 ‘out of pocket expenses’ that we paid people was an important incentive for some but often it came as an unexpected (but welcome) boost to household income. One man told us how he was planning to spend the £20 on a present for his son (whose birthday it was that day) and another informant said she would use it to buy new pairs of jeans for herself and her daughter. Most often interviewees appeared to respond out of interest rather than for solely pecuniary reasons, wanting to express their views about our research topics in the hope that this might help improve things (e.g. in their local area or as to how the benefit system worked). Others pointed to the attraction of having something to do in what were often long and boring days if they were unemployed.

What the Chicago sociologist Robert Park (Park *et al.*, 1925) called ‘shoe-leather ethnography’ also helped enormously in recruitment: ‘hanging around’ the estates, public libraries and the neighbourhood Jobcentre Plus (JCP) office, approaching members of the public to see if they fitted our recruitment

**Figure 1: The Teesside Studies**



criteria (i.e. aged 40 to 60 years, long-term resident in our research locales and having had recent periods on unemployment benefits and in jobs) and were willing to participate. Some initial questions helped to screen out those with very limited employment careers and/or near permanent joblessness and poverty (in favour of those with low-pay, no-pay work histories). Despite our efforts, it still transpired that a handful of interviewees had job histories that did not fit our research brief exactly, although these interviewees still provided some valuable insights into our research questions.

Interviews were audio-recorded, lasted between one and two hours, were conducted in people's homes or at the university and were organised around a set of thematic headings, yet flexible enough to allow exploration of issues that might not have been expected. The interview transcripts were analysed qualitatively, by comparing key themes, and quantitatively, by counting the frequency of key experiences (such as numbers of jobs). The latter method enabled our estimation of the types of poverty present in the sample. The former provided the basis of the discussion in Chapters 1, 2 and 3.

### **Profiling the interviewees: experiences of poverty**

Despite the challenges of sample recruitment, we believe that the sixty interviews have provided for a rare, *qualitative* account of *long-term*, changing experiences of poverty, mapped against experiences of the labour market and wider aspects of social disadvantage. Whilst prioritising subjective understanding and definition, because of the lack of research evidence of this sort in the extant literature we felt it useful to simultaneously seek a more objective classification of poverty experiences. For the sake of our research questions, it was important that our sample contained sufficient numbers of the 'recurrently poor'. We therefore mapped interviewees' descriptions of personal and household income over their complete working lives against standard measures of poverty, i.e. the most often used 'less than 60 per cent of median income after housing costs' version and JRF's Minimum Income Standard (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2008). We also sought interviewees' own accounts of their experience and their own definitions (as we will show in Chapter 3, these were often at odds with objective measures).

It was difficult to find out about variations in household and personal income over lengthy periods of time, and to situate these against changing measures of poverty. Interviewees were sometimes only able to provide rough details of changing financial circumstances. Estimating changing housing costs proved particularly difficult. We have sometimes used their 'best guesses'. Acknowledging these limitations, and that this is not a study that seeks to measure the prevalence of particular forms of poverty, we can note that approximately:

- o *three-fifths* of the sample were '*recurrently poor*' (having experienced at least two separate periods in poverty over their working life);
- o *one-fifth* were '*permanently poor*' (they had never risen above either poverty line);
- o *the remaining fifth* were comprised of very small numbers of each of the following: those that had 'escaped poverty'; those with only one episode of poverty; those with only one escape from poverty; and those who were never poor according to these official definitions.

Moving away from this technical description, we talked to thirty men and thirty women, aged between 30 and 60 years, who were able to relate their life-stories to us with generosity, candour and detail. Meeting again people we had interviewed previously as young adults, several times over the past ten years, provided further insight into how lives unfold in sometimes predictable but often unpredictable ways. For this younger group, many, but not all, seemed to be further along a transition of 'settling down' into adulthood: of more stable partnerships, life organised around the demands of parenthood, and moving to more secure housing situations in 'quieter' parts of town.

Meeting the new interviewees from older age groups was extraordinarily valuable as well. One self-criticism of our previous youth studies was our inability to properly explore processes of social and economic change across and between generations. The inclusion here of this older age group goes some

way to rectifying this. It also allows us to ask important questions about, for instance, the extent to which the low-pay, no-pay cycle is a relatively novel working-class experience or limited to younger workers. Regardless of the differences between the younger and older people in our sample, regardless of the differences of particular biography between each interviewee, and regardless of whether interviewees were currently in work or on benefits, what most shared was poverty. None were 'well off'. One or two had 'escaped poverty' by finding more stable employment positions (i.e. they now occupied 'ordinary', relatively secure jobs with average levels of pay). Whilst most interviewees shied away from the self-label of 'poor', some appeared to be *very* poor, in extreme poverty; they were unable to clothe, feed themselves or furnish and heat their homes adequately. Between was the majority experience of living close to, usually under, sometimes just above, official poverty lines. This was the lasting, precarious experience of poor work, unemployment and recurrent poverty – one to be expected and 'accepted' – but told in the resiliency of 'things being tight' but 'surviving' and 'getting by'.

# 1 ‘Low-pay, no-pay’: work motivations, education and getting jobs

## Introduction

In this chapter we describe the predominant type of work history of our interviewees: one of churning around low-paid jobs and unemployment. To that end, particular attention is given to people’s work motivations, their education and skills, and how they accessed employment.

### ‘Low-pay, no-pay’ work histories

*I’m out of work more than I’m in it. It’s just getting harder and harder. Like sometimes I might get two days’ work and I will take it. If someone says ‘there’s one day’s work’, I’ll still take it ...*

Andrew, 43

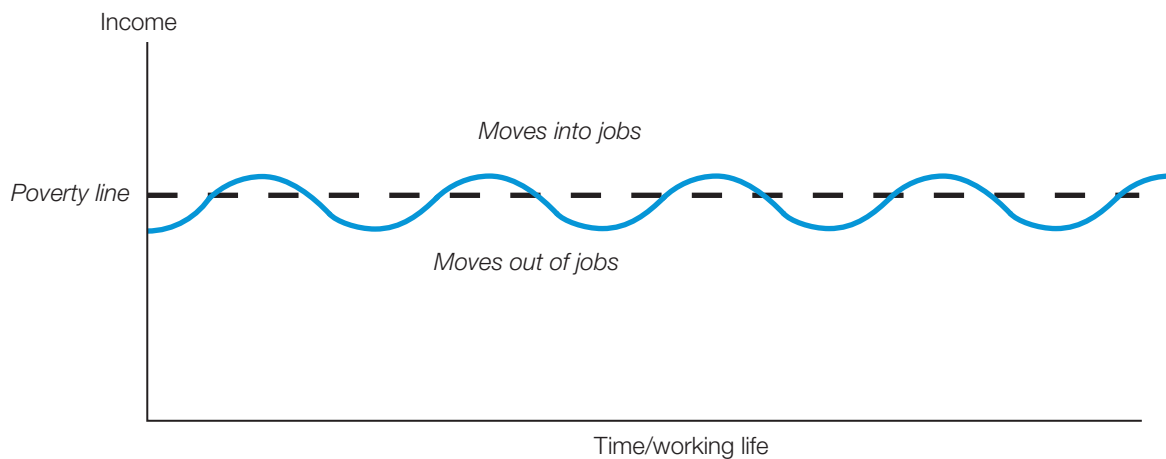
Churning employment careers of government job programmes, unemployment and insecure poor work were the dominant labour market experience for young adults in our earlier studies. Jobs as care assistants, factory workers, labourers or shop assistants did not act as ‘stepping stones’ to better employment. A key question for the project was whether the ‘low-pay, no-pay’ cycle that entrapped the young adults in our earlier studies in ‘poor transitions’ continued. It did. This study, therefore, provides further evidence that the ‘stepping stones’ thesis does not capture the reality of the working lives of the younger adults in our study.

Given how we recruited our older interviewees, it is unsurprising that the majority of them also displayed this pattern. They had classic ‘low-pay “careers”’ (McKnight, 2002:97): they shuttled between low-paid work and unemployment recurrently over their working lives. Younger and older interviewees, and men and women, shared this pattern of working in jobs that did not pay well and did not last, recurrently returning people to unemployment. For most, this had been a long-lasting pattern, stretching back to when they first entered the labour market after they left school. Our aim was not to prove the existence of the low-pay, no-pay cycle for older workers, but to better understand its dynamics and complexities. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the uncovering of this sort of working life is significant given an academic and policy orthodoxy that says these are ‘entry-level’ jobs and work patterns reserved largely for young adults or new economic migrants (McDowell, *et al.*, 2009). As Byrne (1999:74) argues:

*what is absolutely missing [from many accounts of social exclusion] is the significance of the combination of low wages, insecure employment and dependence on benefits ... poor work is the big story ... and represents the most significant kind of excluded life in our sort of society.*

Looking back on his working life, Don, at age 40, said: ‘I was probably out of work on and off, like job here, job there, job here, job there’. If we pictured these working lives as a line over time we would see quickly repeated peaks (jobs) and troughs (unemployment), like a series of waves, see Figure 2. For most interviewees these movements in and out of employment also equated with moves above and below the poverty line, as measured in standard ways. Getting jobs, even low-paid jobs, improved household income to the extent that it carried interviewees over poverty thresholds – albeit usually only marginally. We turn to a more detailed discussion of ‘poverty histories’ in Chapter 3.

**Figure 2: Typical ‘low-pay, no-pay’ work history**

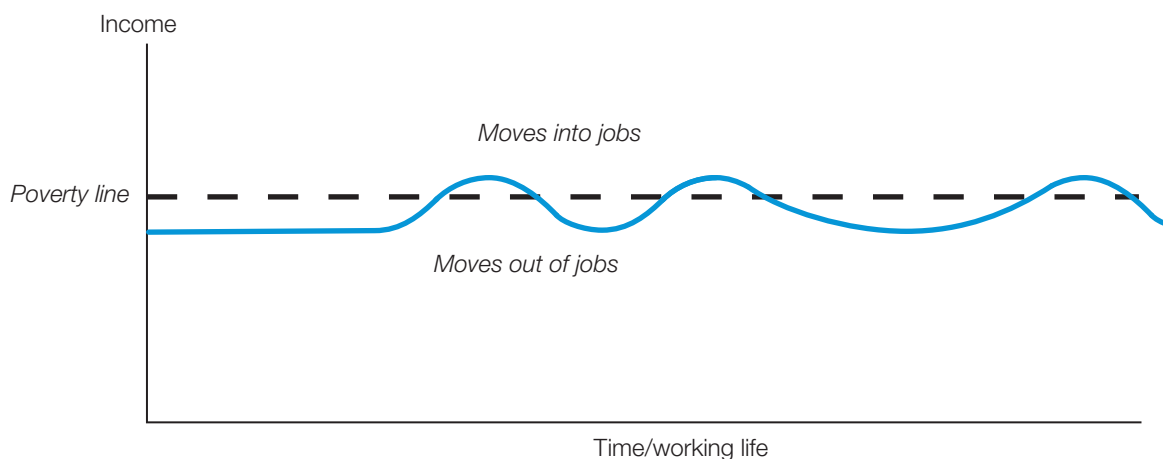


There were three noteworthy variations to this pattern. Firstly, we found work histories to be strongly influenced by gender. Unsurprisingly, women in the study were much more likely to have periods of their lives where patterns of employment were complicated by childbearing and childcare issues (not just relating to their own children, as we see in Chapter 2) to a far greater extent than most of the men in the study. Childcare responsibilities often shaped women’s pattern of engagement with the low-pay, no-pay cycle, with longer periods out of the labour market. Thus, for these interviewees, presented graphically the wave pattern of the predominant low-pay, no-pay cycle would be interspersed with ‘troughs’ stretched out over time. For some women these spells away from employment could be long, with the troughs drawn out over years, depending on the nature of their caring commitments (see Figure 3).

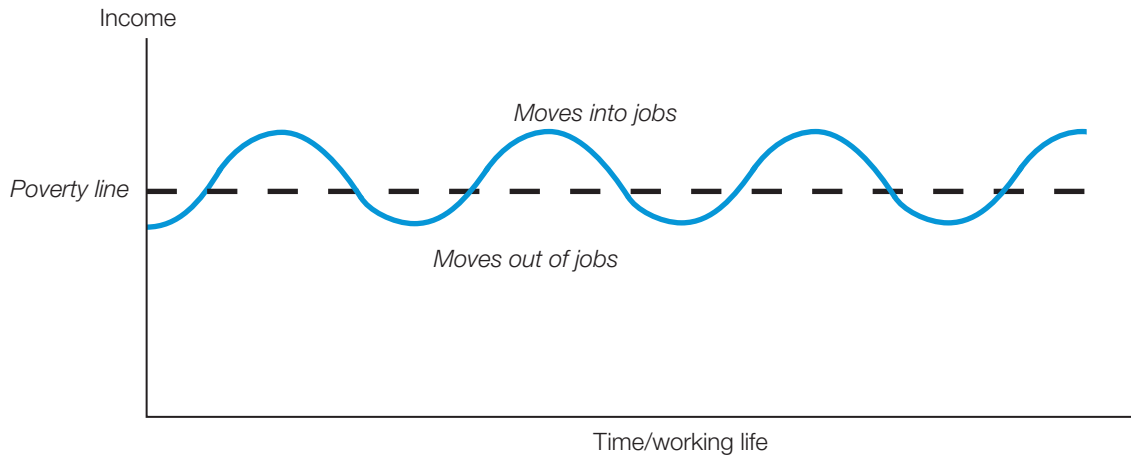
Secondly, a very similar pattern to this was found amongst interviewees (predominantly younger men) who had histories of serious offending and problematic drug use, although the causation was quite different. Struggling with drug dependency and the social, health and legal problems it brought, with time in drug treatment programmes and imprisoned for drug-related offending, these interviewees often suspended (but did not abandon) engagement with the labour market.

Thirdly, a small number of interviewees, typically skilled tradesmen, had a slightly different pattern of work history to the general one. Their occasional ability to secure better-paid, skilled jobs lifted them

**Figure 3: Less typical ‘low-pay, no-pay’ work history**



**Figure 4: Less typical 'low-pay, no-pay' work history**



further away from poverty than was true of most interviewees' moves into employment. Whilst some of these had lengthier stretches of employment in their earlier working lives, more recently they had the typical, wave pattern of churning between jobs and unemployment – the jobs they got remained insecure – but the 'peaks' in their pattern were higher because they were sometimes better paid (see Figure 4).

## Work motivations

To begin to explain the patterns of work history that we uncovered we start by describing participants' feelings about work in a general sense: their motivations and attitudes to employment.

Perhaps one of the strongest single findings of the study is that interviewees, trapped in the low-pay, no-pay cycle over years expressed great personal commitment to employment. Our earlier studies found the same amongst young adults. Deeply embedded class-cultural expectations and attitudes about the necessity and value of working for a living drove earlier, post-school transitions and led young people quickly into the labour market (in preference to extended education). In doing so they replicated the early work histories of our older interviewees and followed a class-based transition to adulthood traditional in working-class communities like this one (Willis, 1977). This remained true for those that we re-interviewed and was also true for our new, older interviewees. This suggests that recurrent churning around low-paid jobs and unemployment does not weaken employment commitment or labour market engagement (even if some people felt demotivated and dispirited *occasionally*).

This work commitment was based on feelings about what it was *necessary to do* (for financial reasons) and what it was *right to do* (stemming both from class-cultural learning and values about the importance of work and experience of the personal social and psychological benefits of working over unemployment). We now explore these bases of work motivation in order to explain why work commitment was so durable and why people might 'want to work 'til they put me in a box' (Stuart, 43).

The necessity of waged work for its contribution to family budgets, even for younger adults, should not be underestimated. Often interviewees would refer directly to how they had learned from their parents the effects of poverty and unemployment. For instance, Carol Anne (34, a part-time teaching assistant and mother to a young son) said:

*Me Dad always worked and me Mum did. I think that influenced me. I saw the difference between when me Dad worked and when he didn't, you know? The money situation: I seen how they struggled when he wasn't working ... like they felt awful at Christmas when they can't buy you the stuff that they want and it really doesn't matter what you get but ... that made me want to work and do the best for Ben really.*



As with our earlier studies in these neighbourhoods, we heard repeatedly how, in academic language, interviewees had inherited inter-generationally a cultural predisposition towards work: a work ethic was learned from parents. This finding reverses common assumptions and stereotypes – that are widespread in political, policy and popular discourse (and amongst support agencies we interviewed, see Appendix) – that explain unemployment in terms of the inter-generational transmission of cultures of worklessness.

Work motivation was also spurred by the social and psychological benefits it was known, through personal experience, to provide (Jahoda, 1982). People felt better in work than when they were unemployed. Compared with the often mentioned boredom of being unemployed – ‘bored, I’ll go down to my Mam’s and we’ll go to the shops. I’ll pick the kids up from school and it’s just the same thing day in and day out’ (Sinead, 36) – having a job gave people purpose and reasons to be out of the house. Andrew (43) said:

*Work? Very important, just to get out the house and that. There’s nowt worse than not working. It’s so depressing. It’s awful, just awful. Like I say, when I’m working I’m a totally different lad, totally different and when I’m not working I’m just down ... It’s hard to explain. It’s just it does put you on this totally, like, puts you on a proper depressing mode.*

Thus, the positive value of work to people’s social and psychological well-being was confirmed by their knowledge of the negative effects of unemployment, particularly of depression (which we discuss in Chapter 2).

## Education, skills and qualifications

The strength of the sample’s work motivation was not matched by high levels of education, qualifications and skill. The sample overall had relatively low skills and educational qualifications. Virtually all had left school at minimum school leaving age and many had had disappointing experiences of school, typically leaving with a few low-level passes at GCSE (or their equivalent predecessors). The reasons for working-class educational underachievement are well documented (Evans, 2007) and our interviewees gave depressingly familiar explanations. This is not to say that *all* were low qualified and low skilled. Some of the older men were skilled tradesmen having completed apprenticeships early in their working lives. A handful also possessed higher level educational credentials: undergraduate diplomas or degrees.

A second point of note is that negative *experiences of school* did not set negative *attitudes to education* in stone and a good number returned later to some sort of post-16 education or training. This included gaining university qualifications, but more common were returns to college, often on a part-time basis, to undertake National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) usually at level 2 (e.g. courses designed to qualify for childcare and teaching assistant jobs). Several had also taken and passed shorter training courses offered, for instance, by training providers in local community centres (e.g. in basic computer skills, computer repair, literacy, numeracy, first aid, etc). Interviewees’ overall perspective can be summed up by Carol Anne, 34 (who obtained her classroom assistant job after completing a short training course, delivered locally with ‘family friendly’ hours):

*Yeah, yeah I do [think qualifications and education are important] ... just to give yourself the best chance you can to get a job, because at school I didn’t try my hardest and I wish I had. I wish I’d gone to college and I didn’t.*

There was some evidence that gaining further qualifications did help some in the search for jobs in indirect and direct ways. Simon, 30, had had a typical churning labour market career. After repeatedly losing jobs and being unemployed, he invested his savings of £2,000 to take a course that led to him passing his HGV driving licence. This opened up new job opportunities (which also, as it turned out, tended to be insecure).

Debbie, 43, had completed an NVQ level 2 in Health and Social Care, working with disabled children on her work placement. Not only had the course helped boost her confidence about returning to work after a long period looking after children, it had also led directly to a part-time job:

*It was the best thing and I absolutely loved it from the minute I walked in. Loved it. Completed the course and I've still got in there the appraisal the woman give me because I was that proud that she'd said I'd done really well and I did that, finished it and they gave me a lunchtime supervision job after!*

Having noted the positive attitude of interviewees towards gaining further training, skills and qualifications, and that there were clearly instances where this aided the individuals concerned, we conclude this section by agreeing with Crisp *et al.* (2009:6) that 'skills development is not an automatic passport to better employment opportunities'. A very significant finding of the study is that overall, for these interviewees, levels of educational attainment did *not* straightforwardly predict improved labour market fortunes. Putting it another way, even the best qualified – those with degrees and diplomas – participated, at least at times, in low-pay, no-pay churning labour market careers in the same ways as the least qualified.

## Getting jobs

### Jobcentre Plus and 'welfare to work' agencies

Research shows that job hunters use a variety of methods to search for work and this was true for our interviewees too (Lindsay, 2010). Periods of unemployment, of weeks to years, defined the churning labour market careers of our sample; when out of work, interviewees typically maintained an active search for employment, investing huge amounts of physical and emotional effort in these searches.

An important finding of our research is that the support offered by statutory and voluntary sector agencies to help people engaged in low-pay, no-pay churning can be limited, patchy and sometimes unhelpful. Most (but not all) of the interviewees necessarily had some contact with Jobcentre Plus (JCP) when they were out of work. Interviewees were overwhelmingly negative about their experiences of this service. Our time spent in JCP offices in the research site and our interviews with JCP staff alerted us to a difficult relationship between staff and clients, with negative attitudes on each side, and a general 'us and them' feel to encounters. At times, some staff appeared unsympathetic to the troubles and distant from the lives of our interviewees. Commonly, participants felt belittled simply by being out of work and having to attend the Jobcentre and this discomfort was often exacerbated by how they felt they were treated by the staff there. Chrissie, 31, had suffered from depression for several years yet had managed to access short-term retail jobs and was currently working as volunteer in a charity shop. She described how she felt about claiming benefits and visiting JCP:

*I don't like it at all. I feel, like, suffocated; that they are waiting for me to do something. I just hate it. I'm an independent person. I don't like relying on benefits. I just hate it. You've got to fill in forms and they ask you questions and you have to give them answers. They turn into the FBI, questioning your every movement. It's like 'I just don't want to be here'. Just going to the Jobcentre makes me depressed. I just detest it, I really do.*

Mary, 30, described her partner Andy's recent, unhelpful encounter with JCP:

*After his disability, he said 'Look, I want to get back into work'. They said 'What do you want to do that for? Keep claiming'. And he said 'I don't want to do that, there's nothing wrong with me' and they were like 'Go to the doctors' and get a sick note'. They were so rude and so unhelpful and that's why a lot of people don't go back to work because they're not getting the help they need. It's quite sad really.*

Some interviewees did not claim benefits during periods of unemployment either because they resisted 'signing on' for moral reasons or they hoped that the period out of work would be too short to justify the hassle of establishing a benefits claim (see Chapter 3). Others were in receipt of Incapacity Benefit which did not require regular contact with agencies. Together these cases meant that a significant proportion of our interviewees felt that they received little support in seeking work from agencies. In this sense they were the 'missing workless'. More generally, the very nature of the low-pay, no-pay cycle – and the relatively short periods of unemployment they experienced – meant that often our interviewees simply did not fit easily with the support on offer:

*I'm stuck here trying my best to get a job. I've been down 'Pathfinders' and they say 'you can't come for eighteen months, that's how long you have to be out of a job'. That's terrible. You don't want to be on the dole eighteen months.*

Andrew, 43

*No, I think I have to be unemployed longer to qualify for things like that [support from a particular agency]. I haven't had any sort of advice from anywhere. I actually did it all off my own back [i.e. exploring options for retraining as a Maths teacher].*

Alan, 38

Yet it seemed that even those with longer spells of unemployment could also fall through the net of support. Shaun, 56, received Incapacity Benefit for a longstanding eyesight problem, yet he had previously worked, and currently did voluntary work for local community and youth groups six days a week. We asked him if he had ever had any help or advice about finding another job. He told us: 'No, no, if you want it you have to go for it. You have to find out yourself basically, you have to go out and look for it that type of thing. You don't get that advice'. Linda, 33, had never had a job. She had 'really enjoyed' the Youth Training Scheme she did when she left school but, in the informal competition for a job offered at the end of her work placement in a butcher's shop, she was unable to add up as quickly as another trainee. Between the ages of 18 and 33 she had spent time looking after her children and her husband and coping with depression and other health problems. She was in receipt of Incapacity Benefit but worked voluntarily for a youth centre and hoped to enrol on an NVQ level 2 course in childcare to help her get a job. Very occasionally she helped clean her brother's takeaway business, not for money but for something to do and in return for free takeaway food. When asked if she had had any help to find work she told us:

*No, no, because I think it's when you haven't got no qualifications as well, it's hard for them not knowing what I wanted to do. It's hard for 'em to find me a job anyway.*

Accessing agencies that could offer more tailored and long-term support for people looking for a job was difficult for many of our interviewees. Many were also completely missing from the system, in that they would not be counted as unemployed because they chose not to register as such. Yet, practically, they were unemployed, keen to work (many were desperate for a job), looking for employment and would have greatly welcomed more support. A hope that they might get this message across to those that might have the power to change things was the reason that several interviewees agreed to speak to us.

For some, their insistence and determination paid off and they got to support quicker after much pushing and demanding. When people did access more specialist agencies for support they were always keen to express their appreciation. They benefited from help with CVs, interview technique, confidence building and various short training courses. Yet even then, there were times when the 'system' appeared constraining. This extract from an interview with Don, 40, alludes to the funding regimes for support

agencies wherein they only receive payment for successfully placing clients in jobs if that job lasts for at least thirteen weeks:

*The dole place says to me 'You've been out of work six month you've got to go with "Pathfinders". So you go over to Pathfinders, you look in the paper there's a job here; eight weeks' work. Pathfinders are telling you not to take it because they want you to have a job [that lasts at least] thirteen weeks so they can get the money off the government for you, so they're telling you not to do it, but that eight weeks' work would sort me out.*

Despite the strong emphasis of government policy on getting those that can work into employment, and the profusion of support agencies available local to our research sites, it seems there are still people – for example, who do not receive job seeker benefits or who have short periods of unemployment – who fall through the net of support. Those engaged in the low-pay, no-pay cycle appear to occupy a particular blind spot in policy and practice provision for the workless.

### Private employment agencies

Many research participants registered with private employment agencies in seeking work. We have discerned increasing use of such agencies, particularly by men, as they reach their twenties and thirties. Richard, 30, said: 'I think I'm registered with every agency in the town'. Furlong and Cartmel (2004) implicate private employment agencies directly in the churning labour market careers of disadvantaged young men in their study in Scotland. In our study too, they were the subject of plentiful criticism:

*With 'Wright Stuff' it was really bad because they lose your details. They said they want people to start immediately but they got back in touch with me after two month. It's just a con for you to get on their books so they can rip people like you off. They pay you minimum wage and get two, three times as much for you ... no wonder they're offering to put a minibus on to get you to work.*

Don, 40

Although Richard had used agencies extensively, he was now disillusioned with them:

*They would phone me up and say there is a job in a factory and I would be there for a while and they just kept on bouncing me from job to job for about eight month ... They say they will find me continuous work and me signing off the dole and they give me a couple of days here and a couple of days there but [because I have signed off benefits] I'm having to pay rent and council tax and electric and gas. When me wages are short they don't want to know. They just want the money, don't they? So I've just come to a decision to just not work for an agency any more – through the debt I've got into with it with me rent and stuff like that.*

A key problem for Richard had been the uncertainty of work from employment agencies. As was common across interviewees, promises of longer-term contracts were often not fulfilled. When Richard started taking contracts via agencies he 'signed off', meaning that he also lost various benefit entitlements that helped him get by, particularly housing benefit. He had hoped that the pay from jobs via employment agencies would allow him to cover all of his outgoings. Because, however, the work he got was intermittent, uncertain and often so short-term (and because he was only paid for the days he worked) – and it did not make practical sense to sign back on for days or weeks when he was not working – he ended up seriously in debt. When interviewed he was unemployed and living on an extremely tight budget, with a proportion of these debts taken at source from his weekly Jobseeker's Allowance. His period of working via employment agencies was directly responsible for the parlous financial situation he was in.

## **‘For me it’s always been not what you know but who you know’: the power of informal social networks in finding work**

Regardless of the limited assistance they received from support agencies, and the problems of private employment agencies, our interviewees repeatedly found employment via informal social networks, confirming findings from our previous studies.

As Lindsay (2010) points out, ‘a particular area of policy interest has been access to social networks among disadvantaged jobseekers in inner-city areas characterised by high levels of unemployment and deprivation’. The social capital embedded in such social networks can aid access to employment. Lindsay concludes that for longer-term unemployed people their work-related networks diminish over time. Whilst this sounds plausible, our interviewees quickly became accustomed to dealing with frequent periods out of work and usually employed informal methods of job searching with differing degrees of success. Some had built substantial informal work-related networks over many years:

*Every job I have had I've got through somebody I know, like family or a friend and his [her partner's] Mam, I got her a job in my old nursing home and then obviously she might be doing the same for me.*

Mary, 30

*I've never actually got a job where I've actually had to apply for a job, wait and go for an interview. I've never actually gone through that way of getting a job. It's more or less people who've wanted someone. I've been in the right place at the right time sort of thing, I suppose.*

Simon, 30

Newton *et al.* (2005) argue that the unemployed can be disadvantaged by employers' recruitment methods, which are often based on word-of-mouth and informal methods of advertising, i.e. the unemployed may become detached from networks of people in jobs and therefore be excluded from tip-offs and recommendations. This certainly did not seem to be the case with our sample, arguably because of their continued, repeated engagement in the labour market. Most of the jobs they entered were got in this way. Several commented, however, that one impact of the recession was to make these networks less effective, because there were fewer jobs to report informally.

Whilst we can regard this job-search activity positively, especially given the weakness of more formal assistance from support and employment agencies, it also served to tie individuals into low-level work. Their networks did not range to better-paid, better-quality employment. These casual forms of recruitment are characteristic of lower segments of the labour market and reflect employers' flexible, casualised practices. What these employers required primarily was a willing worker physically capable of doing the job who possessed ‘the right attitude’ (see Appendix). Our interviewees accessed employment that did not appear to discriminate against them on the basis of educational qualifications, skill levels or work history (even if we heard discriminatory attitudes linked to age and gender in our interviews with employers). Polished CVs and interview performances were not required. Alan, at age 38, said: ‘It was only recently that I had my first interview, after all these years!’ This meshed with, and was reflected in, our interviewees' lack of interview experience (they often dreaded interviews, believing that they would perform very badly). The relative openness of this segment of the labour market is amply demonstrated by the fact that a number of interviewees who possessed records of earlier criminal offending and/or problematic drug use were now displaying low-pay, no-pay careers similar to the rest of the sample. Poor work was on offer in spite of criminal records, previous drug dependency or chequered work histories.

## Conclusions

This chapter has outlined the dominant work pattern of our interviewees. For most of their lives, most had been engaged in the low-pay, no-pay cycle. Similar patterns were observed for men and for women and for older and younger interviewees, although some women had longer periods away from the labour market because of childbearing and childcare and some men (with skilled trades) moved further away from poverty in their periods of employment. Our interviewees showed resilient and lasting work commitment despite the frustrations and setbacks associated with repeated periods of unemployment. In this chapter attention has been given to interviewees' work motivations, their skills and qualifications and how they entered jobs. In the next we focus more on the experience of doing poor work, of unemployment and of leaving and losing jobs.

# 2 ‘Low-pay, no-pay’: insecurity, churning and wider disadvantage

## Introduction

In this chapter we move to discussion of the experience of low-paid jobs and the insecurity that defined interviewees’ working lives. We focus on both sides of the ‘employability’ equation, examining firstly the ‘demand side’ of the labour market and the structure of opportunities it offered our interviewees before moving on to ‘supply side’ factors (e.g. issues of ill health and of caring responsibilities) that impacted on ‘low-pay, no-pay’ careers.

### ‘Low-pay, no-pay’ careers: the demand side of the economy

#### *Teesside’s deindustrialised labour market*

*Everything’s just gone. The clothing industry went, the steel industry went, the shops are going ... my friend’s daughter, she’s been to college, but she can’t even get a job in a shop. They’re not taking people on. She put her name down for Argos, all places that do well at Christmas but just nothing. There’s that many people got their name down for these jobs, there’s nothing for this area.*

Janice, 56

*I think it’s absolutely terrible. When I was eighteen my dad got me a job at Corus [local steelworks] and that’s all changed now. Your parents can’t just get you in. It’s all changed now.*

Chris, 32

Younger and older interviewees were aware of the dramatic changes that have affected Teesside’s economy. Older interviewees knew from direct experience how opportunities for reasonably paid, skilled or semi-skilled manual work had declined in number over the years. Don (40) told us ‘when you used to go on a shut down [a standard phase of production at the steelworks] years ago it used to be good money. Now the shut downs are just above minimum wage’. Mark, 36, recalled how fifteen years ago he used to earn ‘£15, £20 an hour for joiners like me and you go on jobs now – £6.35 an hour’. Lash and Urry (1994) describe how places that once thrived on a robust manufacturing base now mainly offer ‘junk jobs’. Whilst there are still remnants of better-quality working-class manual employment in Teesside, the impact of long-term economic change in the structure of the local economy combined with the national recession has created very difficult conditions for the unemployed.

#### **Working in a deindustrialised local economy: low pay, low skill and insecurity**

Even though our older participants now accessed low-skilled, short-term, National Minimum Wage (NMW) jobs in the lower levels of Teesside’s economy, many had earlier in their working lives been employed in better-paid, more secure jobs. Typical of national trends, service sector employment was widespread amongst the sample but not the only sort. Interviewees got jobs in care homes, in nurseries as carers

for infants or in schools as classroom assistants. Several had worked as cleaners. Many had worked as operatives in food-processing and textile factories. Some still accessed jobs at the steelworks, but only temporarily and in unskilled roles. They had served in bars and fast-food restaurants and call centres. They had worked as shop assistants and delivery drivers. Some had been security guards; others had driven fork-lift trucks or heavy goods vehicles. Some did construction work of various sorts, particularly labouring and scaffolding. There was little age differentiation in the types of work done but some predictable variation by gender (e.g. construction work was done by men, cleaning and caring work was predominantly done by women).

Three things united these jobs: they were typically *low-skilled*, *low-paid* and *insecure* with only a few exceptions. By low-skilled we mean that they did not require much in the way of previous experience, training or qualifications. As confirmed in interviews with employers and agency staff, physical ability to do the job and possession of the 'right attitude' (i.e. being willing, reliable, hardworking and 'flexible') were the key qualifying criteria. Mainly, these were routine jobs that offered little scope for autonomy, decision-making, creativity or the expression of skill.

By low paid we mean that most were NMW jobs. Interestingly, interviewees (employers, agency staff and workers) would often describe this pay as 'fair' or 'good' pay. This, we think, can be explained by three related factors. Some employers in the most casualised, deregulated sectors still pay below NMW. We had an indication of this in interviews, including with one employer who appeared culpable. Secondly, the introduction of the NMW has lifted pay levels, so compared with wages prior to the NMW, these were regarded as 'good'. Finally, most interviewees had little experience of better-paid jobs and had few points of comparison by which to judge 'good' or 'fair' pay.

Defining insecurity is more complicated. Most straightforwardly, some jobs were offered on temporary contracts. This was most evident in jobs accessed via private employment agencies, where jobs of sometimes just a few days were assigned. Some interviewees had accessed grant-funded posts in the social welfare fields (e.g. in youth or community work roles) which were time limited and their extension dependent on the winning of further funding. Some had accessed jobs that were formally permanent but had been made redundant by their struggling employers. Others' contractual situations were less clear; more informal and unwritten. They were unable to say precisely whether the job was 'permanent' or 'temporary', only that it had ceased, and sometimes they were unclear as to exactly why it had.

### **Doing poor work**

Experiences of low-quality jobs were, perhaps surprisingly, often described in highly positive terms in interviewees' subjective evaluations. In part this can be explained by the strength of interviewees' orientation towards work and their negative experience of, and attitude towards, unemployment. Overall, it was not the specifics of particular jobs that they did that made some interviewees talk effusively about them (although some were clearly better jobs than others) but rather simply work itself that was valued. Debbie, 43, said of her unqualified community and youth work job: 'I love it, absolutely love it ... Every day's different ... I enjoy going to work. I enjoy having summat'. Getting jobs, for a woman like Debbie, who had spent much of her life claiming benefits, bringing up children and in violent, abusive relationships with men, brought an enormous boost to her confidence and self-esteem and signified important, positive, biographical change.

These positive commentaries about work – founded on long-standing, class-cultural valuation of the importance of working coupled with experience of the stigma, boredom and psychological decline of unemployment – are only part of the story. The same interviewees who described the positive benefits of work *in general* could describe the unpleasantness, injustices and hardships of particular jobs they had done:



*It was just minimum wage I think it was about £5.12 an hour ... pretty rubbish really for the hours you put in – but it was just a job at the end of the day ... you're like a machine (laughs quietly). It's just the same thing, day in day out. It used to do your head in after a bit – but it was just a job, but it just always tends to dry up through being with an agency (Richard, 30, describing a job in a food-processing factory).*

Pollert and Charlwood (2009) describe how many 'vulnerable workers' face problems at work yet lack union representation and how 'low paid and unrepresented workers face a significant risk of being denied their employment rights' (2009:354). This seemed to be the case with our research participants. Interviews told of the physically and mentally demanding nature of jobs. Many interviewees had had to work 'unsocial hours' (e.g. evenings, nights or weekends) and employers often seemed to operate 'flexibly', in terms of the hours of work offered or required and the pay given. There seemed to be limited support for workers, in respect of sick and holiday leave or training. Interviewees described instances of:

- not being paid properly for extra hours' work done;
- being required to do extra hours at very short notice (with the threat of dismissal if they did not);
- being required to undertake tasks that seemed unreasonable and outside of their normal role;
- being treated unfairly in relation to other workers;
- of the refusal of requests to leave work early or take time off for family reasons (e.g. because a child was sick);
- losing maternity allowances because of employers' bureaucratic errors;
- being sacked for taking a day's sick leave, and so on.

Food-processing factories in particular were reported as offering easy-to-get but hard and demeaning work. A recent report by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2010:2) provides a graphic insight into the 'widespread poor treatment of agency workers' in the meat-processing industry, including verbal and physical abuse and lack of attention to health and safety practices.

Typically, interviewees described these aspects of poor work in 'taken for granted' tones rather than in ones that stressed the unfairness and injustices of poor work. Sometimes the demands of jobs, coupled with limited wages and nil prospects, would cause interviewees to quit them. For instance, Simon, 30, had resigned from a job as an assembly line worker in an electronics components factory because he felt working night shifts over months in a stressful job was impacting on his mental health. Alfie, 46, told us about his experience of working for a chilled food company:

*The management, they just don't care about the staff. They treat you like robots ... If you went over and said 'I've cut my finger off', they'd just say 'make sure you don't get any blood on the food'. That's what they were like.*

Eventually Alfie's resentment at what he saw as unacceptable working conditions boiled over and he confronted his boss about pay and working conditions, only to be told, 'If you don't like it, don't do it'. By this time, Alfie had simply had enough: 'I threw me card at him and walked out'. Based on research with low-income mothers in the US, Brooke-Kelly (2005: 83) argues that 'quitting may be one of the only forms

of resistance available to workers' in low-paid, flexible jobs. Challenging a dominant discourse that sees workers who quit as lazy or feckless, she suggests that where employment is low paid and constraining, quitting becomes an expression of resistance on the part of the worker. For the small number of our interviewees who took this step it seemed to be the only expression of autonomy open to them.

### **Better-quality employment**

As a counterpoint to the general experience of poor work described by interviewees, here we note the significance of better-quality employment to the few in the sample who had managed to secure it. For those who appeared to have escaped poverty, work of this sort had been crucial.

Marge, 31, had worked for the same employer, a local voluntary sector youth support agency, since her early twenties. Formally, her youth worker job was temporary because it was based on recurrent grant applications. Comparing this with earlier jobs as a hairdresser she said:

*This has been my best job because, you know, it's satisfying other people's needs and you're there supporting people ... and the company as well that I work for is absolutely fantastic. They're supportive in all ways, with home, childcare; in your job as well they listen to you. You can self-manage, really.*

Over her time with this organisation, Marge had had a child and her husband had experienced chronic ill health. She described her employer as very 'sympathetic', providing support she needed in terms of time to care for her child and husband. The employer had also provided funding and time to allow Marge to complete a part-time undergraduate degree in youth work.

In this and other cases it is worth noting that better-quality employment was found with voluntary sector, 'not for profit' organisations that operated with social as well as commercial goals. Smaller commercial businesses were more likely to offer poorer quality work and have unsympathetic, unaccommodating attitudes to workers. Even here, however, there were a few exceptions that showed that this need not always be the case. Sharleen, 33, was a single mother with six children and worked part-time in a local butcher's shop. She was full of praise for her employer:

*They're fair. I mean, ours is only a small shop. There are only three of us and I basically go in on their days off. It's really good. They're dead flexible so if I need, say, if the kids need a doctor's appointment there's no questions asked. They'll just swap the day off so I can go in on a Monday or a Tuesday or whatever ... The other week I was really poorly. I had a chest infection and the doctor told me I had to stay off work for a week but I don't get sick pay because I'm only part-time, so she was really good to me and she said come in on Saturday and then all day Friday to make my hours up.*

### **Low-pay, no-pay careers: the 'supply side' of the economy and wider disadvantage**

So far in this chapter we have concentrated on describing interviewees' experiences of the labour market where the insecurity of poor work underscored the insecurity of their working lives. Yet from our earlier research we learned that it is not possible to fully understand labour market marginality without an appreciation of the wider aspects of people's lives (Webster *et al.*, 2004). In the remainder of the chapter we examine how poverty and wider disadvantage were woven into interviewees' experiences of low-paid jobs, particularly in their accounts of why they lost and left employment. We focus on two themes: ill health and caring for others.

#### **Ill health and bereavement**

Hammen (1997:56) concludes that 'poverty is associated with increased risks of virtually all forms of psychological disorder ... also unemployment or employment in lower status occupations are typically

more associated with depression'. Our interviewees matched precisely the risk profile for mental ill health outlined here. Consequently, depression and anxiety-related problems were described by many and, in terms of physical health, arthritic, respiratory and cardiac problems were not uncommon. Some were dependent heroin users and suffered predictable health problems. Alcohol dependency was also mentioned by some.

The relationships between ill health, poverty and the low-pay, no-pay cycle are complex. On the one hand, jobs were reported as responsible for ill health. Simon, 30, described how working in a call centre affected him: 'I had a tough time there. I was having panic attacks all the time so I wasn't there as much as I'd have liked to have been. I think it was just due to the job, really'. Pamela, 54, had been employed as a care worker and had been looking after a patient who used a wheel chair when she had a work-related injury:

*To get him on the bus, I had to pull the wheelchair back and then lift it and I felt both my sides bang! I was crippled with agony ... I was in so much pain, phoned work and said, 'I've really, really hurt my back' ... I can't afford to go on the sick but I went on the sick for two weeks and what happens is when you go back they make it bad for you. They were sending me on calls miles away and I said, 'I can't do it'. I had difficulty walking and I carried on for a few weeks but I just couldn't. They were getting increasingly nasty to me, offhand. So I just wrote a letter to them one day and said, 'It is just obvious I can't do my job to my satisfaction'. So I handed in my notice.*

As this extract suggests, employers were sometimes unsympathetic to even short periods of illness and their response to ill health, rather than the health issue itself, could be the reason for people leaving jobs. Elizabeth, 30, took a week's sick leave from her job in a nursing home after having her wisdom teeth removed:

*All week I had them [her employers] knocking at the door for me to go in and I thought, 'No, I've had enough'. I went back the following week and I just went to see the manager and said, 'Look I'm leaving'.*

On the other hand, however, personal ill health could limit engagement with employment. Ronnie (57) had suffered two 'nervous breakdowns', plus some other more minor health problems. His wife died when she was in her forties and he attributed his long-term depression to this: the 'pressures of life'. He had spent lengthy periods in psychiatric hospital which clearly impacted on his ability to work and he had been in receipt of Incapacity Benefit – yet he had also managed, intermittently, to hold down low and semi-skilled jobs. Ronnie valued working above all else: 'I think it is important, yeah. It determines how your life leads and how your health feels. If you've got a job I think you're happier in a job'.

Our earlier studies (Webster *et al.*, 2004) reported what we felt to be high levels of bereavement amongst our sample. Over half in the *Poor Transitions* study reported the loss of a loved one such as a parent, sibling, close relative, child or friend (we did not count grandparents). Bereavement 'rates' were at least as high in this study, with illness, suicides, drug overdoses and car accidents prominent causes. Below Janice, 56 and currently unemployed, describes a series of family bereavements, including the deaths of two grandchildren.

*We were really bad with the first one. We had never been through that before. She [her granddaughter] died in the March and I lost me brother in the August to cancer. Then me Mother got diagnosed with a brain tumour that year so I had her stopping here and I had to watch me Mam die ... it all built up, you know. Then, like I say, two years ago me other granddaughter died, so it's been hard ... when you lose a grandchild it's just something that you never got over. Plus, you know, you have other members of your family dying and it all builds up.*

Beyond the negative impact of this series of bereavements on Janice's health (depression), it also had consequences for Janice's employment. She told us 'when my daughter lost her baby she had a nervous breakdown so I left work to look after her', a theme we return to below.

In sum, although jobs could make people physically and mentally unwell, so could unemployment, with depression in particular being reported as a health consequence. Living in poverty heightens dramatically the risks of ill health and bereavement (Joshi *et al.*, 2000) and, for some of our interviewees, living close to poverty long term combined with the dynamic process of churning between poor work and unemployment to cause their poor health, which, in turn, further limited their engagement with the labour market. Thus, whilst ill health might be seen as a 'supply side' problem that limits employability it was also, in part, caused by the 'demand side' of poor-quality employment.

### **'The ties that bind': caring, parenting and grandparenting**

*A lot of them, they're agencies and you 'phone up and they're trying to ship you all over the place. I'd rather go for something that's a bit more secure. I like to know what my hours are and what I'm doing so I can sort the kids out.*

Mary, 30

The impact of gender on the low-pay, no-pay cycle is played out most obviously in terms of the differential impact of childbearing and childcare on men's and women's work histories. Our findings would support the conclusions of Warren and colleagues (2009: 2) who argue that 'it is mothers, rather than fathers, who bend their jobs to meet family needs', suggesting that this relegates some women to marginalised sectors of employment, experiencing indirect discrimination, poor conditions and discontinuous work histories built around part-time jobs. Grant (2009) has shown women living in areas of disadvantage face additional problems in accessing employment, particularly in respect of finding local, flexible employment which works alongside manageable and acceptable childcare. Many of the mothers in our study reported the same and were more likely than men to search for work in their immediate neighbourhoods:

*The employment that I need is to work around my children. I can't do nights and I can't do weekends, so it's quite hard. [In respect of a particular job she was considering, she said] you started really early on a morning and you're finishing at 6 o'clock so it's no good because I'd have to pay out childcare as well so it's not going to be worth it, like ... I don't really want to put him into full-time childcare but then I'd have to see if I got a job working full time. How much would it take out of my wages for childcare? So it's a Catch-22 situation, isn't it?*

Sinead, 36

Fitting childcare responsibilities in with the demands of college and training courses, undertaken to improve job prospects, was also reported as a problem. Thwarted attempts at betterment could have debilitating impacts in themselves, as Amanda (48, currently unemployed) describes:

*It [the course] was supposed to be over two years but they crammed it into one which eventually got the better of half of us. We just couldn't do all the reports, presentations and with the kids – travelling from college to the childminders – I was literally going to bed about 3 a.m., because I had to do me washing, homework, shopping, ironing, out the house at 6 a.m., one to the childminder's, nursery, run round the college for 9 a.m. . I was getting passes though, but I didn't get the final module but I was getting passes ... I was very annoyed at having to leave and not complete it. I think if it had gone at a slower pace ... because they didn't take into consideration, your family. They were cramming it. I got depressed because I thought 'this is ridiculous, I can't be a mother and a career woman'.*

*I knew I had the capability. I just didn't have the support, really. You can't do 9 a.m.–4 p.m. five days a week as a single parent on your own.*

Yet for others, childcare programmes such as Sure Start led to increased opportunities and positive experiences. For example, Sharleen, 30, found that the programme gave her the motivation to get back into work:

*Before we went to Sure Start I used to get up, clean up, go to my friends or our Leanne's and we used to just sit and drink tea and smoke fags all day, that's it, and, like, maybe nip up into town and that'd be [it]. We all said one day, 'Is this our lives?' and we all got up and got jobs and we did!*

When Sure Start was accessed it could be a great support to parents, yet supporting other research which suggests that working-class women are sometimes wary of formal childcare (Griggs, 2010), many of our interviewees expressed a preference for self- or family childcare over that which might be provided by agencies or outsiders.

Beyond finding appropriate childcare, the interviews contained numerous examples of how interviewees had to choose between fulfilling important caring duties for their families and remaining in employment. As Winnie, 44, explains, childcare commitments for her grandson resulted in her exiting the labour market: 'I mean I actually give up a full-time job so I could look after my grandson ... to make it easier for my daughter [to find work]'. We have interviewed Alice, 30, three times over the last ten years. Most recently she told us how her son had been diagnosed with cancer, when he was three years old. She and her husband now spent long periods at a specialist cancer unit 50 miles away. Her partner had to leave his work as a gardener as the council 'could not keep the job open'. They struggled to access benefits because he had 'voluntarily left his job' and even when they were eventually sorted out they suffered serious financial difficulties as a consequence of her son's life-threatening illness.

High degrees of informal social support can often be found in deprived neighbourhoods (Kearns and Parkinson, 2001). We have noted elsewhere (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005) how close family bonds and ties can both ameliorate the hardships of deprivation and limit individual's chances of escaping deprived situations. In Chapter 3 we show how reliance on assistance from family and friends was the only way some of our interviewees survived at times of exceptional hardship. A less commonly reported finding, which comes from our study, is that the demands of caring for drug-dependent children can also seriously inhibit engagement with employment. Teesside provides a classic example of a place that suffered a 'second wave heroin outbreak' in the mid-1990s (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). A vibrant heroin market and an associated criminal economy was established very quickly, concentrated on the most deprived neighbourhoods. Studies show that neighbourhood deprivation and problem drug use are strongly linked. For some, drug use offers criminal opportunity, for others, respite from the stress and boredom of living in poor areas (Shaw *et al.*, 2007; Boardman *et al.*, 2001). Our earlier studies charted how young adults growing up in these places at this time, both users and non-users, were greatly affected by the social, legal and medical problems generated by the drug economy. Some of those we re-interviewed for this study made transitions to adulthood overshadowed by careers of heroin use and crime. We did not expect issues about heroin use to be significant for our age sample and given our main research questions. Yet we were struck by how many of our older research participants described, unprompted, the impact having a heroin-dependent son or daughter had had on their lives in general and labour market participation in particular.

Even though Brian, 54, was one of our better-qualified interviewees (he completed a degree in Human Resource Management in his thirties), he still had a chequered employment career including working in different sorts of food-processing factories. In recent years he had been unemployed. He attributed some of the difficulties he faced to ongoing problems the family faced with their son who was addicted to heroin. They had been repeatedly burgled by the son and they had had to take formal custody

of one of their grandchildren (the other was taken by a grandparent on the mother's side). Consequently, his wife reduced her hours at work and was currently off sick with stress:

*My son, he's a heroin addict to put it bluntly ... it's ten year now, he's coming up to 26. It's been difficult to try and cope with what he does. He's been away to prison and they try to get him back on track ... It is quite sad, so at the moment, we've actually had to become foster, kinship carers ... so it's a bit of a mess at the minute ... It's a huge financial drain having someone like him [his son] about, not just in terms of what gets nicked but it's also in terms of the things you need to do to keep them together ... It's an investment in time and other things cost, like food and electric. Even just running around – they're not good with appointments and things like that. We've got a calendar up on the wall; it's the only way to cope with it. And children as well now, that's an additional thing remembering to get their jabs and stuff. So it's a huge investment in time, a huge investment in money and what that tends to do it depresses your ability to actually do anything else, you become emotionally drained.*

Research shows that there are 200,000 grandparents and other family members raising children because they can no longer live with their parents (Grandparents Plus, 2010). The role of grandparents in supporting families is relatively little discussed, yet one in three families relies on grandparents for childcare (ONS, 2009) with the value of this care estimated at £3.9 billion (*op. cit.*). In the United States Engstrom (2009:2) highlights the plight of grandmothers who undertake care of grandchildren whilst their daughters are in prison or addicted to drugs. Recent research in Britain (Griggs, 2010:9) has shown that grandparents from low-income families are more likely to play crucial roles in respect of caring for grandchildren: 'when a grandparent becomes their grandchild's parent they often experience considerable emotional trauma and stress, retirement savings may be depleted and grandparents' work arrangements disrupted'. They also point to the added financial strain inflicted on those who may already be experiencing economic hardship. We found a number of cases of the same in our study – as with Brian above – of grandparents bearing the strain of family heroin problems, with clear implications for their capacity to engage in paid employment as well as wider ramifications for their lives.

## Conclusions

Our research participants found work in the lower reaches of Teesside's deindustrialised local economy. The jobs they got can be described as poor work; it was low skilled, low paid and insecure. Whilst the 'demand side' was primary, with the sort of employment they got being the key driver of churning, low-pay, no-pay careers, 'supply side' aspects of wider disadvantage were also a source of work insecurity. In this chapter we have focused on two issues: ill health and caring. Illness, related and not directly related to long-term experience of poor work and unemployment, was a factor in making work careers uncertain and insecure. Childcare responsibilities done by women – and the wider care and support provided through families in deprived neighbourhoods – were also significant in explaining limits on work participation and why some jobs were given up.

# 3 Poverty across working lives

## Introduction

In this chapter we turn from an analysis of participants' working lives to an exploration of their experiences of poverty. We begin by describing how recurrent poverty was tied to the twists and turns of labour market churning. This is followed by a discussion of the welfare benefits system, focusing on interviewees' reluctance to claim benefits and, when they did, the complexities and difficulties of claiming. The final part of the chapter examines the paradoxical ways in which research participants talked about poverty and 'the poor'.

## 'Low-pay, no-pay' and recurrent poverty

With only few exceptions (i.e. the handful of people who had gained better-quality employment, see Chapter 2), defining features of the lives of the sample were poverty and economic marginality. Whilst jobs sometimes – but by no means always – brought some limited financial gains, these were only ever short-lived and overshadowed by broader and longer-term economic hardship. Their economic marginality is demonstrated in their relegation to churning low-pay, no-pay careers at the bottom of the labour market. The effect of this marginality was widespread and lasting experience of poverty over working lives.

The majority of our interviewees – about three-fifths – we describe as experiencing recurrent poverty. For this group, their occasional 'escapes' from poverty were sometimes related to household change (e.g. meeting a new partner) but usually explained by getting employment that lifted them and their households above the official poverty line. These escapes were temporary, reflecting the insecurity of the jobs they got, and usually 'short-range' (i.e. they did not move far above the poverty line), reflecting the low-paid, NMW employment most accessed. Statistics show that only just over half of households in poverty (56 per cent) move out of poverty when someone in the household gets a job (Matejic *et al.*, 2009). The costs of going to work (e.g. transport, childcare, and the loss of some key associated benefits) limited the financial gains of employment. For most, the keenness to be in work – rather than close calculation of the financial pros and cons of jobs over benefits – was what drove their engagement with the low-pay, no-pay cycle. The experience of recurrent poverty – of moving in and out of low-paying jobs but never moving far from poverty – was the predominant experience of the sample. Importantly, as we will show, even where our interviewees made *formal* poverty exits, they generally continued to face economic hardship and, because of their debts, in practice they continued to live in poverty.

## Social security? Encountering the welfare benefits system

### 'The missing workless': avoiding benefit claims

By definition, those in the low-pay, no-pay cycle are likely to have repeated experiences of claiming welfare benefits. Support agency interviewees felt strongly that the 'safety net' provided by benefits was a major barrier to the workless seeking jobs. Interviewees sometimes agreed, but not in respect of their own life stories (a point we pursue later). In fact, overall, these interviewees' engagements with the labour market defy this idea of a 'benefit trap'.

The vast majority of interviewees were unquestionably committed to working and it would not be an overstatement to say that most deplored claiming welfare benefits. Some avoided claims altogether or for as long as they possibly could: 'I've seen me not sign on the dole for two months because I'm just so embarrassed going in there. I just can't stand going in the place' (Andrew, 43). Aaron, 46, was a qualified French polisher and had occasionally managed to get better-paid jobs. He lived off previous earnings when he lost jobs rather than signing on: 'for the first six months I lived on what I had and then I was dipping into my savings, so I went on the dole'. Similarly, Laura, 31, and her partner – who had got short-term but well-paid contracts as a scaffolder – had been in and out of employment for years. For her, the process of having to claim benefits was a 'right rigmarole ... basically he is out [of work] a lot more times than we claim. So we pay for ourselves basically, but it annoys you. It really annoys you'. Avoidance of claiming benefits was not confined to those who occasionally managed to get better-paid jobs that could tide them over during periods of unemployment. André, 33, had worked in several different care homes over a ten-year period with short periods out of work in between. He earned just over the NMW:

*The whole thing repulsed me, signing on. I just couldn't be doing with it; sponging off the state. It's the hassle as well. You've got to sign on and then sign off and I just couldn't be bothered.*

In Chapter 1 we referred to 'the missing workless'. By this we mean those who, because of the short-term nature of their unemployment, fall below the radar of employment support agencies. As we have seen in this section, some of 'the missing workless' – because of their wider values about work and welfare – prefer not to seek their welfare entitlements and were not registered as unemployed. Opposition to claiming was also based on their stressful and difficult encounters with the benefit system.

### **Making benefit claims**

With few exceptions our interviewees were critical of their experiences of making benefit claims via Jobcentre Plus (see Chapter 1). Many said that the advice that they received seemed unclear and often contradictory. Siobhan, 36, had recently been made redundant from her sales assistant job when a well-known high-street chain store had gone into liquidation. Her interview is cited at some length as it is instructive of the sorts of confusion and frustration that can surround attempts to claim welfare benefits:

*It's awful and because I'd never, ever done it before I didn't know what to expect. I went in and she said 'You're not entitled to any benefits' and I said 'Sorry?' and she said 'You're not entitled to anything'. I mean, I'd worked all my life. 'You're not entitled to anything because you haven't paid enough National Insurance over the last three year'. So I said, 'Well what does that mean?' She said, 'Well it means you can't get Jobseeker's Allowance because you haven't paid enough contributions'. Well, I got a letter last week to say that 'because I'd reapplied' – and I hadn't reapplied – 'because you've reapplied, you're entitled to £60 a week on Jobseeker's Allowance'. So I phoned 'em up and said, 'What's this about, I've been told I'm not entitled to anything?' and she said, 'Oh yes, you're entitled to Jobseeker's Allowance, £60 a week. It'll go into your bank account on Monday the 16th'. So yesterday I checked my bank account – no money in, so I phoned them up and she said, 'You're not entitled to it because you've got a partner', so I said, 'No, the lady told me I was entitled to benefits' and she said, 'No you're not entitled to anything because you've got a partner, he has to pay for you, phone family credit'. So we phoned family credit up [Working Tax Credit]. They won't give us any extra money till April because the new tax year started in April. So I can't get no money from anywhere.*

It was not unusual for interviewees to be on the receiving end of decisions that they failed to understand yet felt completely powerless to challenge: 'They don't believe you when you say you haven't received the forms but we have to believe them when they say they've sent them out ... in the end it took us nine weeks to get a penny' (Janice, 56).



Interviewees described their dealings with the benefit system as demeaning and frustrating, sometimes with disastrous financial consequences. The processing of claims was often felt to be slow and awkward. This meant that weeks – sometimes months – with no obvious source of personal income were commonplace. Family support (e.g. the provision of meals, informal loans of cash) was crucial when transitions to welfare support were slow. Interviewees were often reluctant to accept such help, which added further emotional stress to their situations:

*And within a week they stopped my benefit. I had to fight it and it was five weeks before I was given a payment. I had to stay at my Mam's. She had to keep me and she's a pensioner ... I felt guilty because I couldn't contribute so I'd say, 'I'm not hungry, I'll get something later'. She'd say, 'Well you haven't had anything today'. I felt like a little girl sometimes because she used to make me sit at the table and she'd say, 'You will eat', but I felt really bad that I couldn't contribute. It took five weeks before I got it back [her rightful benefits payment].*

Jennie, 47

Churning between low-paid, insecure jobs and what was regarded as unsatisfactory welfare support had one major consequence for interviewees: a life of poverty.

## Being poor

### Everyday hardship

Interviewees' everyday lives were ones of financial hardship. This was particularly true in periods of unemployment but also could apply when people were in jobs. Winnie, 44, who we would class as 'persistently poor', had spent her working life moving between jobs in caring, cleaning and shops, all low paid and part-time (which allowed her to look after her infant grandson during the day and thus enable her daughter to go to work). When interviewed, she had two part-time cleaning jobs that gave her £576 a month. After her outgoings she was 'left with barely anything':

*I struggle, really struggle because by the time I pay me bills, gas, electric and water rates, TV, all that, I'm left with a couple of pound that's it ... I wanted to work. If I didn't work I think I'd go crazy ... I mean, to be honest, somebody in my situation, I would probably be better off on benefits.*

Debbie, 43, was currently employed and her husband was self-employed. The couple had bought their own home with the aid of a mortgage, even though neither at the time had steady employment with regular income (i.e. a classic case of a 'sub-prime mortgage'). She had been hoping to get a job that had then fallen through:

*so with my money coming in we would have been fine but then that job didn't happen so we all went to pot and to find the money just to pay the mortgage, never mind anything else, it is such a struggle.*

The couple had looked into selling their house and moving back into rented accommodation but they faced substantial negative equity and:

*With renting properties you had to have references and clear credit history so no one would take you on. All the waiting lists were so high because people were getting in the same situation. We are stuck between a rock and a hard place.*

To cover mortgage repayments they had taken out further loans, which they had been unable to repay. She 'robbed Peter to pay Paul', selecting each month which debt repayment to default on. On the morning of

the interview she had been ‘hiding from the bailiff’ and was worried that she might not have been able to let us into her house: ‘he’s given us 24 hours to pay, they want at the last count nearly £700 and we haven’t got that, so ...’. Debbie described how her family was ‘just making it day by day, really’ but how working at the same time as living in poverty felt ‘just pointless’. When asked about the future she said she looked forward to being in a position ‘in five or six years’ time, where she would be ‘be happy if I could say “I’m able to pay my bills and I don’t owe the bailiffs”’; that would be nice to be able to say that. I don’t care about extra money and stuff. It would be nice to be able to say “I can pay my bills”.’

For interviewees, day-to-day life was a juggling act which demanded strict routines, such as getting to the shops to catch the daily reductions, careful decision-making about purchases, and long-term planning for special events (that brought extra pressure) such as children’s birthdays and Christmas. Women, who had responsibility for running household budgets and for looking after children, talked most explicitly about financial strain:

*I walk to my eldest daughter’s house and I’ll ask her to give me a meal. I go to Sainsbury’s about 9 o’clock and look for all the reduced items. You’ll buy a loaf of bread and it’ll last you for four days. Reduced eggs they’ll last you a week. I got half a dozen free-range woodland eggs for 20p the other day. So you’ve got six eggs. A loaf of bread, reduced vegetables, whatever it is, and I’ll have vegetables with rice, bread and egg.*

Amanda, 48

*If I want clothes or the kids want anything, it’s always like getting the loan book out [from a doorstep loans agency], you know? I would, like, have to miss something to get something, if you know what I mean? It’s awful. There’s never anything in my purse. It’s always empty. If someone said ‘do you want to go somewhere?’ I couldn’t just get up and go out and do it.*

Sophie, 30

Despite clearly expressed financial strain, people were also keen to stress that they budgeted properly, managed well on what they had and that they coped. They had pride in coping in adversity. Family was often a reliable means of help and support with day-to-day necessities:

*My family are good. My daughters, if they are cooking dinners, they do extra and they send it down every night. We got two lots last night because one had done chilli and one had done spaghetti bolognaise – so we got a choice! [laughs]*

Janice, 56

Leisure lives were limited by lack of money (and further constrained by family responsibility) and often focused on home-based activities. Holidays were rare for most in the sample and several people reminisced about holidays they had been on in their childhood. Their absence – and the aspiration to have a family holiday – was repeatedly mentioned and emphasised in interviews, which we interpret as symbolic of what it meant to live in financial hardship to these interviewees. Lennie, 57, described how he would love to find a job which would allow for this sort of ‘luxury’:

*Maybe £9 or £10 an hour – just enough to live on and put a bit aside and have a holiday. I don’t know when we had our last holiday. I cannot remember our last holiday.*

Janice, his wife, reminded him that it was when their daughter, now aged 34, was four years old. Interviews with Janice and Lennie also highlighted some interviewees’ difficulties with housing costs. A small number, like this couple, had bought their council house and as owner-occupiers they were unable to receive complete housing benefit towards mortgage payments when they were unemployed – and had

to undertake household repairs themselves. People in this situation sometimes seemed to face extreme hardship. Our interviews with them were held during the winter months:

Janice: *I mean we can't afford to get the heating done and that's not ideal, especially with me getting chest infections – but we can't do anything about it. You just have to get on with it, keep going sort of thing. Heating broke five weeks ago and we can't afford to have it fixed.*

Interviewer: *So how's it been for you, how have you managed?*

Janice: *Cold! [laughs] There's no heating, there's no hot water...*

Lennie: *We've been sleeping down here ... we listen to the weather forecast and because the past couple of nights it was due to plummet, so we stayed down here because up there it's freezing cold ...*

Janice: *It's bitter cold ... you can't even go in the bath to get warmed up because there's no hot water. There's the shower but you're that bloody cold when you get out. So I go to me daughter's next door but one for a bath ... my bones ache, don't they? Really ache. I just cannot get warm. He puts that on full [points to electric heater] but I still cannot get warm, so it's pointless wasting the gas.*

Our older interviewees were those that seemed to live in the hardest conditions. Ronnie, 57, suffered from long-term depression and had shuttled between low-level jobs and time on Incapacity Benefit. He received a small pension from one of his jobs and, currently, 32 pence a week Job Seeker's Allowance (a fact which he was keen to prove to us by producing the letter informing him of this). He seemed to be barely able to survive, stressing the dangers to his tight budgeting if 'anything major goes wrong'. He relied on family support: 'me brother bought me some shoes at Christmas, so I'm alright for shoes. They're a bit tight. I'll go and get them stretched I think ... How would I manage if I didn't have their help? I'd be contemplating suicide I think! [laughs]'

### **Living with debt**

Welfare benefit payments do not take into account the debts that people may still have to pay. This means that many of our research participants lived in deep financial hardship, existing on below what is officially regarded as necessary for subsistence. Similarly, official measures of poverty do not take into account debts that individuals may have accrued and, accordingly, we did the same in our estimations of whether people were recurrently poor. Many of those we judged to have moved above the poverty line when they accessed low-paid employment carried with them significant debts which undermined the potential gains of waged employment. Wages typically did not provide enough to pay off debts. In other words, practically, they remained in poverty because of this combination of debt and the low pay they received even when in work. Debts shadowed the lives of research participants, when they were in jobs and when they were unemployed.

As a consequence, borrowing from family and friends was a regular and necessary practice for the vast majority:

*Desperate, sometimes you get desperate. I mean some weeks if you have to borrow off somebody, the next week you're in an even bigger hole.*

Amy, 30

Interviewees used a range of sources for borrowing money, including family and friends, national doorstep loan companies and unregulated neighbourhood moneylenders (both of which typically charge very high rates of interest). Ben-Galim and Lanning (2010:4) suggest that poverty and job insecurity increase

vulnerability to debt problems. The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) has recently rolled out its *Growth Fund* to Middlesbrough to make personal loans more affordable to those on low incomes and reduce reliance on expensive doorstep lenders, yet this was the predominant form of lending in our study. Loans were taken for daily living costs, not the purchase of luxuries, and interviewees disapproved of getting into debt for things which others might see as essential:

*I'd love to go abroad but in the end the way I look at it me house and me bills come before and I won't get in debt to go on a holiday because then you've got the debt to come back to. It's not right, it's not right ... I'm not going to get in debt to do something like going on holiday.*

Linda, 33

Debts tended to be cumulative and doorstep lenders seemed routinely to offer clients further loans when they struggled to make payments:

*Loans, well I've had to reduce everything. It's the worst way to do it, to bail yourself out. Because then you are putting yourself in deeper and deeper anyway, but sometimes you can't help doing that.*

Winnie, 44

Defaulting on repayments drove people deeper into debt and made repayment even more unlikely, as we saw with Debbie's attempts to repay her sub-prime mortgage (above). Interviewees also routinely incurred debts as part of the fraught transitions into and out of work. Benefit run-on payments that are meant to help people cope with the transition between benefits and work had limited impact for our interviewees because these run-ons only lasted for a short amount of time, because people did not then access well-paid jobs and because their main difficulties related to the period between losing jobs and accessing welfare, when payments were often severely delayed. Liam, 33, for example, took out a Social Fund crisis loan whilst he was waiting for his benefits to be sorted out: 'Forty odd pound I got, something like that ... I don't know the ins and outs. I've been lucky with work. I don't know the ins and outs of the [benefit] system'.

Mary, 30, describes how she was forced to take out a loan via the benefits system when her partner came out of work:

*Just to keep us going because we were living off my family allowance [Child Benefit], which doesn't even cover the gas and electric. So we were borrowing money off family and getting loans off people coming to the door, just to keep us. We couldn't afford it so in the end we went to them and said, 'we need some help'. We should really have been entitled to a 'crisis loan' but they said we weren't entitled so we had to claim a 'budgeting loan' where you have to pay it back. They took so long! They are just not bothered there's a family there with no money or any type of income.*

Sometimes our interviewees found that they incurred debts in the process of going to work. This was especially the case where jobs did not last as long as they had been told they would. In Chapter 1 we discussed how Richard, 30, had built up debts as a consequence of signing off as unemployed (and consequently losing a range of benefit entitlements) and then only getting sporadic, very short-term jobs via private employment agencies. The 'continuous work' he had been promised amounted to 'a couple of days here and a couple of days there' and yet he still had to pay his normal outgoings (rent, utility bills, council tax) now without the support of benefits: 'I ended up in about £500 of debt through it. I'm still paying it off. All for just being with an agency'. Currently unemployed, a set amount was deducted from his weekly £64 Jobseeker's Allowance to repay these debts. Whilst we have classed Richard 'recurrently poor' by official measures, the debts that he now carried with him in and out of employment, and his reduced benefit income, meant that he had been living long term in poverty.

## The normalisation of hardship, the denial of personal poverty and blaming 'the poor'

We have described how interviewees endured significant financial hardship and the day-to-day struggle of surviving on combinations of low pay, benefits and loans. Strikingly, however, they simultaneously would emphasise the normality of their lives (see Flaherty, 2008). What to an outside observer might appear as abnormal hardship and, at times, situations of extreme poverty – being unable to afford food, clothing or heating – were presented as unexceptional problems. In doing so, as justification, interviewees would compare themselves with what they imagined others' situations to be. Comparisons were made locally: 'nobody's rich round here. They are all just struggling to get by' (Micky, 30). Comparisons were made more widely, as well. The following is from Janice, 56 (who, above, describes living with no heating or hot water because she could not afford basic repairs); the emphasis is ours:

*We don't have a lot but we manage. I think that's how it is for a lot of people round here ... there are loads of people in the same situation as us, some worse ... I think at the minute everyone's struggling, aren't they? It's not just round here, it's all over the country, people are having hard times. I think everyone is the same all over the country.*

The media prominence given to the national economic recession at the time of fieldwork – and how there might be 'loads of people in the same situation' – only in small part explains this emphasis upon the normality of their experiences. In previous research we have uncovered exactly the same rejection of the idea that interviewees, growing up in contexts of objective, extreme, multiple deprivation, might face unusual hardship and poverty (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). There are several explanations for this.

Firstly, as noted, points of reference were often close, not distant. Participants compared their lives with others they knew near them, socially and geographically: 'nobody's rich round here'. An assessment of *relative* poverty over short social horizons led them to regard themselves as *not* poor (i.e. at the bottom), but 'the same'. Research by Bamfield and Horton (2009) has noted the tendency of people, regardless of where they sit on income scales, to underestimate the extent of income differences and inequality in the UK. Many of our interviewees even denied the existence of poverty in the UK, either locally or nationally.

Secondly, interviewees – as Janice implies, above – took some pride in being able to cope and manage in difficult circumstances. Their life stories were characterised by resilience and by an emphasis on 'getting by'. People had learned to live with never having very much; a common and long-term working-class experience, across generations.

Thirdly, this sense of pride at getting by was clung to in opposition to the stigma and shame that still attach to the words 'poverty' and 'the poor' (Lister, 2004). Consequently, poor people are often reluctant to accept this label as a self-designation. Even those in the most disadvantaged of circumstances will tend to distance themselves from others who are argued to be 'worse off'. This was certainly the case with our interviewees. Lister also correctly (2004:180) notes that 'the way the "non-poor" talk about the "poor" is often demeaning and disrespectful'. The way that our participants described 'the poor' was also, however, often demeaning and disrespectful. Whilst some talked sympathetically about the elderly as a group vulnerable to poverty, more widespread were powerful, negative representations of poor people. The 'poor' were people different from them: 'living on the streets, most of them are on drugs anyway' (Linda, 33). Homeless people and those dependent on drugs were often singled out. Predominantly, discourses about people living in poverty were ones that presented poverty as a consequence of individual culpability; of moral failure and of the failure to manage, like our interviewees felt they did, in difficult circumstances:

*Over the other side of the estate, yeah, very poor. Some of the places that are over there are awful. There is crime constantly and they are very poor and the kids haven't got much, but that's because the parents are spending it all on drugs or getting drunk every night.*

Mary, 30

*Some people struggle because they are too busy drinking. They don't manage it. They either go out drinking or drinking in the house every day and there's drugs and stuff, that's what makes people so poor.*

Dawn, 30

*Well, there is a girl over the road. She's got three kids and she buys all the stuff, the gear for them but then they don't eat properly. They have that white plastic bread in their hand and they don't eat properly. I've seen them in Morrison's just buying fish cakes, fifty for £1.*

Pamela, 54

These negative, victim-blaming discourses about poor people were loudly echoed in interviews when local worklessness was explained and the workless described.

As in our interviews with employment support agencies, unemployed people were often seen as work-shy and preferring a life on benefits to employment: 'They are, like, comfortable in what they are getting and they know it is going to be there and they are, like, "why should I work if they are going to pay me?"' (Carol, 44). We would explain this in the same way that we explain participants' paradoxical comments about 'the poor'; as a local discourse that borrows from a powerful, widespread stereotype that demonises those who are unemployed or living in poverty, that distances the speaker from the stigma and shame associated with poverty and worklessness, and, in doing so, bolsters a personal sense of self-respect and pride in managing to get by in hard conditions.

## Conclusions

Poverty and economic marginality defined the lives of most people in our study. Churning low-pay, no-pay careers at the bottom of the labour market were primarily responsible for a widespread experience of recurrent poverty. NMW jobs temporarily lifted people just above official poverty thresholds. The insecurity of these jobs caused repeated returns to unemployment and consequent dips back below this threshold. Because 'poverty exits' were both short-range and short-term, and because individuals often carried the burden of debts with them, 'poverty exits' were rarely experienced as such.

Many interviewees were resistant to claiming welfare benefits and the welfare system was experienced as slow, inefficient and demeaning. It did not provide social security for the people in our study. The everyday hardship of living in poverty was relieved in part by support from family and friends and by expensive loans. Debt was widespread, adding to financial strains. Intriguingly, despite the explicit hardship reported, most interviewees did not describe themselves as poor, preferring to stress the normality of their situation and their ability to manage and get by. In contrast to what they regarded as their own situations, poverty was explained with negative stereotypes that emphasised the personal culpability of 'the poor'.

# 4 Conclusions

What can we conclude from this study of the dynamics of low-pay, no-pay cycles and recurrent poverty, from the point of view of people living in deprived neighbourhoods? The first part of this final chapter summarises and makes clear our conclusions from the research, spelling out its key messages. The second part turns to the implications of our research for policy and practice.

## Key findings

### The 'low-pay, no-pay' cycle

The study found that the churning labour-market careers typical of young adults in our earlier studies continued for them as they reached their thirties. The inclusion of older interviewees who also shared this pattern of working life adds to the limited knowledge we have about this sort of work pattern and questions policy assumptions that regard these as 'entry level', 'stepping stone' type jobs reserved for younger workers or new economic migrants (see MacDonald, 2009).

Labour market insecurity coupled in complex ways with the multiple disadvantages faced by people living in deprived neighbourhoods to create the cycle of low-pay, no-pay. It is impossible to identify the precise impact that residence in a deprived neighbourhood can have on these patterns of working life without close comparison with non-deprived neighbourhoods (particularly in respect of potential differences in the qualitative experience of low-pay, no-pay). Nevertheless, it is likely that both the 'supply-side' (e.g. of ill health, caring responsibilities) and 'demand-side' difficulties (e.g. fewer better-quality jobs) associated with deprived neighbourhoods mean that the prevalence of the low-pay, no-pay cycle amongst workers is likely to be higher in these places.

There were some differences in interviewees' work histories; a key one being that women with caring responsibilities sometimes spent longer spells away from the labour market. Nevertheless, this pattern of churning between low-paid jobs and unemployment was the predominant one for our sample. It was followed by both men and women and even affected individuals with higher levels of skill, education and qualifications.

### Work motivations versus intergenerational worklessness?

Ideas about intergenerationally transmitted cultures of worklessness are popular in political, policy and popular discourse. These ideas were certainly prevalent amongst the support agency workers we interviewed, being suggested as a deeply entrenched barrier to getting people into jobs (see Appendix). Our study found little evidence of this sort of culture of worklessness but, of course, we purposefully sought out individuals with continued, long-term work engagement. It might be that such attitudes and values exist in our research locales, beyond the sample we interviewed. A forthcoming study (Shildrick *et al.*, 2011) will investigate this question.

From this study we report the little-heard counter-story; of individuals striving to work for a living, across decades, regardless of the lack of financial reward given by their intermittent employment. We do not find, as might have been supposed, that people, as they continued on with churning labour market careers into middle age, became 'discouraged workers', withdrawn from the labour market in preference to

the hassles and hardships of poor work interspersed with unemployment. Similarly, there was widespread antipathy to being – and being seen as – what the pejorative local parlance refers to as a ‘dole wallah’. This was surprisingly common amongst young adults in these areas of high unemployment (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). This study found that it extended over time for our re-interviewees and across generations (as reported by our new, older interviewees). Interviewees were able to give many reasons why they felt work was the ‘normal’ and right ‘thing to do’, as we described in Chapter 1. An overriding finding of our three previous Teesside studies – and of this one – is that, even in the most unpromising conditions, people cling to highly conventional values about the social, psychological and financial importance of employment.

## The two sides of ‘employability’

Employability is a concept often taken to refer to the characteristics of would-be workers. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) remind us that the opportunities awaiting would-be workers determine their employability too. If there are no jobs, we are all ‘unemployable’. As concluded by the JRF programme overall (Goulden, 2010), the conditions of employment available to our interviewees were the main cause of their low-pay, no-pay work histories. Predominantly, this was poor work: low paid and low quality. The shocking insecurity described in the life stories told to us was caused, primarily, by the insecurity of this work. Some of our older interviewees’ working lives began under different economic conditions, when the local labour market still provided greater numbers of regular, standard, lasting jobs. For our younger interviewees, churning between benefits and jobs had been their only experience of working life.

Not all can be explained by this criticism of the structure of employment conditions. On the other side, our interviewees faced a variety of ‘personal troubles’ that caused them to lose and leave jobs. Caring for children and other family members was a key factor, as were health problems (their own and those they cared for). It is important to recognise, however, that these two sides of employability interlink. Sometimes the health problems that prompted leaving a job were caused in part by that job – or at least by long-term, insecure, poor work. Mental health problems were not uncommon in our sample and often linked to, if not fully accounted for by, harsh or unrewarding experiences of employment – and by being unemployed, recurrently. In other words, an experience of long-term economic marginality and social disadvantage had negative health consequences which further entrenched marginality and disadvantage. This is all the more disturbing given what we know of the *potential* positive health advantages to people of being in a job (Black, 2008).

Finding childcare that was affordable, acceptable and that fitted with the ‘family unfriendly’ hours required by some jobs was also sometimes the stimulus to quitting them.

Better-quality employment would have more easily accommodated the sorts of personal troubles reported by interviewees. For instance, salaried professional jobs give parental and compassionate leave, sick pay, paid holidays, employment protection, flexible working hours, opportunities for training and advancement and so forth. The handful of individuals in the study who had accessed better jobs talked about exactly these things in explaining how they felt their employers cared for them, minimising the disruption that came from wider hardships in their lives (see Chapter 2).

## Labour market demand, the recession and poor work

The recent economic recession has had a substantial effect on the Teesside labour market. Greater numbers are joining the queue for jobs, making it even more difficult for those with chequered employment histories. Goulden (2010) finds that the problem of people moving repeatedly between work and unemployment has risen by 60 per cent since 2006, mostly because of the recession. One support agency worker in our study voiced his frustrations: ‘What’s the point of aspiring [sic] people if the jobs aren’t there?’ Cycles of low-pay, no-pay are not restricted to periods of recession, however, as demonstrated



by the fact that this had been the *long-term* experience of working life for most interviewees, under more buoyant economic conditions as well.

What is significant, therefore, is the *continued ability* of our interviewees, hampered by unspectacular CVs and often by challenging personal situations, to get jobs. This highlights the need of the lower reaches of the economy for workers even in times of recession and in places of long-term structural unemployment. These findings are quite contrary to pronouncements about the drying up of low-skilled work and the necessity to 'up skill' in order to access an increasingly higher-skill economy. Whilst the supply of better-skilled workers *is* proportionately set to increase markedly by 2020, this does not necessarily mean that there will be proportionally increasing demand from employers for those skills. In fact, important research by IPPR (Lawton, 2009) argues that although the numbers of people with no qualifications seeking work will have dropped from 2.5 million in 2006 to around 600,000 in 2020, without concerted policy action the numbers of jobs requiring no qualifications is likely to remain at around 7.4 million.

Important findings of the study bear on these debates about skill/education levels and employment outcomes. Firstly, whilst interviewees were relatively low qualified they had a positive attitude towards gaining further training and skills and this helped some people into jobs. Secondly, however, levels of educational attainment did not, overall, predict improved labour market fortunes. Even the best qualified – those with degrees and diplomas – had participated in low-pay, no-pay churning labour market careers in the same ways as the least qualified.

### **'Recurrent' and 'persistent' poverty**

A prime aim of the study was to investigate recurrent poverty conceptually as well as empirically. The majority of our participants could be classified as having experienced recurrent poverty. Is this a useful concept, a helpful way to capture their experiences? We see two contrasting answers, on the basis of this research.

Firstly, in the affirmative, the concept of recurrent poverty highlights the difficulties people had in getting clear of poverty even when they possessed strong, resilient work motivation and biographies that showed them putting this into practice with repeated engagement in jobs. The concept of recurrent poverty draws attention to this important finding. Various factors lay behind their moves in and out of poverty, not just ones to do with the labour market. Household change affected individuals standing vis-à-vis the standard poverty measures, with, for women, the formation of new partnerships with regularly employed men being a way of moving above household poverty thresholds. The break-up of partnerships usually had the opposite effect. Having children was also a key critical moment in poverty histories (Tomlinson and Walker, 2010). For this sample, however, the main cause of the recurrence of poverty was exits from employment. Their recurrent poverty hinged around the low-pay, no-pay cycle. Losing the income from even low-paid jobs typically dropped households back under the poverty line.

Our second answer raises some questions about the concept of recurrent poverty. As explained in the introduction, unequivocal judgements about where individuals and households stood in respect of officially determined poverty lines were difficult to make. This problem applies to any categorisation of poverty and is not restricted to recurrent poverty. The *dynamic*, longitudinal nature of the latter, however, amplifies measurement difficulties tremendously. More substantively, it felt peculiar, as qualitative researchers, to allot individuals' experiences to policy categories (constructed by quantitative measures) that did not capture those experiences as they were *lived* and *felt*. For example, whilst some participants clearly felt that employment made them financially better off than on benefits, many were doubtful. Or they felt that life was not substantially better, financially, in work. Thus, for many, 'escapes' from benefits to jobs did not *feel* like escapes from poverty, even if technically they were. Differences in household income were often marginal – and short-lived. Significantly, outgoings on debts are not calculated into poverty assessments even though these have a direct impact on living standards and household income (e.g. for some being deducted from benefit payments at source). Their debts were often accrued because

of failures of the benefit system or during periods of low-paid, insecure employment. Such debts were then carried long-term across periods in and out of work. If debts were taken into account in poverty assessments, many more of our research subjects would be judged as existing long-term *under* the poverty line, rather than swinging repeatedly above and below.

Another important finding relevant to how we conceptualise poverty is that people under severe, everyday financial hardship would typically reject 'poverty' and 'poor' as terms that related to them. There is an ethical dilemma here for qualitative research which, on the one hand, seeks to remain loyal and respectful to interviewees' accounts and self-definitions but, on the other, finds these definitions to be inaccurate. Our imperfect resolution to this dilemma has been to provide close, fair descriptions of the lives told to us but to explain carefully those lives – and interviewees' rejection of poverty labels – from our different, sociological vantage point (see Chapter 3). As well as being true to their accounts we have a duty to be true to our own sociological understanding of those accounts. This finding, as well as presenting ethical dilemmas of representation, presents challenges to political change in the interests of people living in poverty if, even amongst those suffering from it, poverty remains seen as a distant problem of others and 'the poor' regarded as culpable for their poverty (Flaherty, 2008).

Discussion of the pros and cons of the concept of recurrent poverty, and of how we represent those with experience of poverty, should not distract from the more important findings of this study. The welfare benefits to which interviewees were entitled failed to protect them from poverty and, despite repeated, resilient engagement with the labour market, employment failed to provide routes away from it.

## Implications for policy

Our study prioritises thinking about policy in respect of the demand side of the economy. In short, we talked to people who were keen, willing and able to work, who only sometimes were restricted in their ability to do so by personal factors in their lives. The main cause of their poverty and unemployment was the weaknesses of the opportunities available to them in the local labour market.

The policy conclusions of the four other studies in the JRF programme of research on recurrent poverty (see Goulden, 2010) similarly prioritise issues of job insecurity and wage levels in tackling recurrent poverty. Our findings directly support many of the programme's policy recommendations. For instance, we would concur with the programme's call to improve the rights of, and conditions for, agency workers because, as Chapter 2 described, private employment agencies acted as a key driver of the low-pay, no-pay cycle. They played an increasing role in the working lives of our interviewees, particularly of men, in accessing jobs, but were also culpable in the insecurity and subsequent debt that faced workers. We also agree with the programme findings that making childcare available, affordable and desirable to parents on low incomes would improve their ability to engage in employment (McQuaid *et al.*, 2010).

In the final pages of the report we wish to discuss two particular policy recommendations in more detail. The first is highlighted in the programme conclusions and the second is brought to light most by our study rather than the programme as a whole.

### **Improving the quality and pay of poor work**

Policy discourses about the unemployed and those in low-quality jobs will often repeat the standard 'skills agenda' policy response ('improve skills to get better jobs') – or raise questions about the aspirations of the unemployed or low-skilled workers. Neither response addresses the question of who will do those low-paid jobs that are socially and economically necessary and that are predicted to remain abundant in the British economy. An alternative question, recognising the two sides of the employability equation, would ask what aspirations we have for the sorts of jobs done by our interviewees – jobs such as caring for the elderly and infants, working in factories, or as sales assistants, or cleaners – that currently sit at the bottom of the labour

market status hierarchy, that meet with such poor rewards and around which participants' churning labour market careers pivoted.

At the time of writing, in June 2010, the recent election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government makes it difficult to be clear about the future of welfare policy. Government announcements have stressed the importance of 'making work pay', yet evidence from the first Emergency Budget seems to suggest that rather than improve the quality and pay of jobs, 'incentives' will be focused more firmly towards the reduction or the withdrawal of welfare benefits. The government has committed to lasting reform of welfare and £11 billion of savings on welfare benefits (Osborne, 2010). The focus seems to have returned quickly and firmly back to a simple 'welfare to work' policy, in a context of rising unemployment. Early analysis of the new proposals suggests that, along with the richest, the poorest – like our interviewees – stand to suffer the most.

Our study has shown the value of better-quality employment as a route away from poverty and insecurity by inclusion of a handful of interviewees who had managed to get better jobs. As a counterpoint to the majority experience of churning around insecure jobs that offered little career progression, they worked for employers that offered jobs that *retained* them in work (e.g. employers adopted a sympathetic or at least non-punitive attitude to employees' personal troubles) and helped them advance in their jobs too (by investments in training, by promotion). Given this, an obvious conclusion is to support the recent policy interest in retention and advancement in employment. The JRF research programme as a whole has reached important conclusions about the potential for employers to move away from core-periphery staffing models – and thus reduce temporary and flexible jobs – as a way of tackling the low-pay, no-pay cycle. Goulden (2010) argues that such improvements to employment conditions might be made relatively easily and at little cost. Given the right encouragement, we imagine that some of the larger employers for whom our interviewees worked might be persuaded to adopt better employment practices. We fully support policies towards this end.

We think it unlikely, however, that some of the very small employers we talked to, or were told about, will ever feel the need – or the ability – to offer anything other than low-level, low-skilled, insecure work. A ready supply of suitable workers, and close profit margins, means that this is unlikely to be a priority. One other way of improving these sorts of jobs, then, is to increase their remuneration either through 'living wage' campaigns or the NMW. Both policy mechanisms avoid reference to 'poverty' and are therefore likely to find more support amongst their beneficiaries who, as we have seen, distance themselves from this term. The key reason why our interviewees were sometimes able to escape poverty (as officially measured) was because they had accessed NMW jobs. Raising the NMW would assist in alleviating the hardships and debt that come from recurrent cycling between such jobs and unemployment. Improving pay in the lowest echelons of the labour market will not only help in alleviating immediate economic hardship, but will also entail other, less obvious benefits. Within the JRF programme, Metcalf and Dhudwar (2010:1) have shown that paying above the NMW helps to reduce insecurity and to improve staff retention: 'some employers could switch to offering higher paid, more secure jobs without damaging their business' (see also Goulden, 2010).

### ***Intervening in the 'low-pay, no-pay' cycle: support for the 'missing workless'***

The failure of our interviewees to find and keep jobs was chiefly caused by the insecure, casualised labour market they occupied. Yet getting into and staying in work is only a precursor to labour market progression, the first step on a longer road which might lead people upwards and away from poor work. Few of our interviewees made it beyond this first step. The labour market failed them, as did policies which inadequately recognise and respond to the short spells of unemployment that many experienced. Equally answerable was a welfare benefits system which responded slowly and inadequately to the frequent transition periods inherent in the low-pay, no-pay cycle.

In terms of policy recommendations we can learn from the voluntary sector support agencies in the locality that offered wider and longer-term support to unemployed people to get and to keep jobs. In

other words, as well as helping clients ‘from welfare to work’, they offered ‘aftercare’ tailored and directed in various ways towards retaining clients in new jobs. This was some of the best local practice that we heard about and it was highly praised by interviewees.

The problem, however, is that access to these sorts of extended support services was limited to individuals who were *long-term* unemployed (usually meaning a period of over six months). As we have seen, periods of recurrent, *short-term* unemployment was definitive of our interviewees’ working lives. Consequently, they did not qualify for access to some support services from which they might have benefited (Chapter 1 describes how some interviewees actively strove to enrol with ‘Pathfinders’ even though they had not yet been unemployed ‘long enough’). The majority of the employment support agencies we interviewed (or who assisted our interviewees) were primarily oriented towards ‘welfare to work’; getting people into jobs, not keeping them there, and even less in helping them to make progress upward through those jobs. Additionally, many interviewees had had negative experiences of the private and statutory agencies they had dealt with. Others who did not claim benefits at all or who were long-term Incapacity Benefit recipients felt they received very limited support of any sort to help them into jobs. We have described many of our research sample as ‘the missing workless’ – missing from counts of the unemployed but, significantly, missing out from existing support services for unemployed people. Greater attention to the needs of the recurrently, short-term unemployed workers is, then, a clear policy message from this study. One facet of this would be to extend support to the shorter term unemployed in order to help them access better-quality, lasting jobs and to make progress through employment. In addition, the introduction and wide availability of a careers guidance service for adults could play a role in reaching ‘the missing workless’ and in helping people escape the cycle of low-paid and insecure work.

A recent report commissioned by the new coalition government to look at welfare dependency and worklessness acknowledges many of the problems that our study has identified:

*Even before the recent recession too many people experienced ‘churn’ between low-paid jobs and out-of-work benefits. The usual snapshot unemployment data miss this issue. Almost one million people made five or more claims for Job Seeker’s Allowance between October 2000 and March 2010. While a high churn rate can reflect a system that is working well in encouraging people to accept temporary jobs instead of benefits, the prevalence of repeated claims over a period of years suggests that more could be done to help people turn an employment opportunity into sustained employment.*

(HM Government, 2010)

Government plans to create a single ‘back to work’ programme for all unemployed people, via ‘The Work Programme’, and to provide quicker support to some groups, are intended to tackle what is perceived to be welfare dependency. The evidence of our study, however, suggests that at best these are likely to be partially successful without concerted efforts to tackle what we found to be the main cause of churning through the low-pay, no-pay cycle: the paucity of opportunities for decent, lasting employment. The introduction of one-year job outcome targets will hopefully result in greater emphasis being directed towards job retention, but whether this will be enough to properly tackle the cycle of churning found in our study is less certain.

We leave the last words of this report to one of our interviewees. Richard, 30, has been interviewed four times in the past ten years, across our previous studies with young adults. Nowhere is our general story better told: a story of how an enduring determination to work met only with insecure, low-paid and low-skilled work and – in Richard’s case – how private employment agencies further entrenched the common pattern of labour market churning. Some aspects of Richard’s life stood outside of what was typical for the sample as a whole (but were however shared by a minority). From his late teens to the age of 23 he was relatively detached from the labour market because of his intertwined careers of crime and heroin use (and the health problems and imprisonment that ensued) (see MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). One concern of our study has been to examine how the wider aspects of disadvantage that come

from living in deprived neighbourhoods impact on work histories. This is one example: the damage to communities and debilitation to individuals caused by the 'second wave heroin outbreak' of the mid-1990s that hit, particularly, the residents of social housing estates like those we studied.

At age 23, however, Richard had concluded his interview with us by stressing the importance to him of getting back 'to normal life'. For the past six years he has desisted from drug use and crime and, just like our other interviewees, is now strongly committed to establishing his life in work. Between the ages of 16 and 23 he circulated between five separate training schemes and unemployment and, despite the drugs and crime, had occasionally held a job. Over the last seven years, since freeing himself of his drug dependency (and the acquisitive crime that supported it), he has been recurrently unemployed. We stress that we do not explain this as an outcome of his criminal and drug-using past. He never declared this to employers and nor did they ask. Those with criminal records in our study encountered the labour market in the same way as those without (see Chapter 1). Thus, Richard had obtained seven jobs, the longest lasting eighteen months. He 'loved' this job, 'it was a good job, like it was a proper company as well, so I felt safe and secure in it'. Because the firm was struggling, the employer made staff cutbacks and 'it was a case of last in first out'. More recently, he had relied on employment agencies for work (and Chapter 3 describes the debts he built up as a consequence). His experiences now capture the churning labour market insecurity of the sample as a whole. We leave the last words to him:

*Just jumping from job to job, it's no way to go. It's a nightmare! Jack of all trades, master of none [laughs]. I just want something with a bit of job security – where maybes I can buy me own house in the future rather than just where you've got to be on a wing and a prayer type thing ... just a job that I can call me own, you know what I mean? Rather than just looking for one all the time or just jumping from job to job.*

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# Appendix

## Employer and agency interviews

We held 13 interviews with staff from statutory and voluntary sector agencies that helped the workless in our research sites (e.g. Jobcentre Plus), and 10 interviews with the sort of large (e.g. the local university, a major supermarket) and small (e.g. a corner shop, a hair salon, a care home) employers that offer jobs to local residents. We sought their professional understandings of the problems of the ‘low-pay, no-pay’ cycle and recurrent poverty which we then compared with those of people for whom these problems were a reality.

Ironically, one potential barrier to successful (re)engagement with the labour market identified by a few of those in the low-pay, no-pay cycle – and which we observed first hand – was *the profusion, and confusion, of agencies and support services for those seeking work*. On one road alone we found almost a dozen private and voluntary sector agencies (with similar names), often in uninviting buildings and some appearing to be closed. Obviously this could discourage people, particularly if they have low confidence and are wary of seeking help to begin with. Another issue related to these numerous agencies and their programmes is an apparent ‘revolving door’ scenario, described by some of the interviewees, wherein the same ‘client’ circulates through ‘the system’ repeatedly in an attempt to find work. From what we learned in our interviews across the study, the quality of service provided by these agencies appeared uneven, with the potential that all (particularly similar sounding ones) might be easily ‘tarred with the same brush’ of negative experience.

Overall, interviewees perceived a number of barriers to local residents entering jobs. These included a range of *personal attributes*. Low confidence and sociability, lacking the ‘right attitude’ to the job, poor personal hygiene and basic skills (literacy and numeracy), and a chequered employment history were all regarded as barriers to successful recruitment into jobs. Interestingly, given policy orthodoxy about joblessness as an effect of the possession of low skills/qualifications in a high-skills economy, neither employers nor support agencies described poor formal qualifications as a barrier to getting a job. *The ‘skills agenda’ was notable for its absence from employer and agency interviews*. For instance, the manager of a care home commented that: ‘qualifications aren’t important as long as they are interested in the job, flexible and committed to working in care’. This, we think, reflects the sort of employment on offer to local unemployed people and the fact that low-skilled work still exists in some abundance (see Chapter 2). It also reflects the continuing emphasis of employers and agencies on entry to (any) employment rather than what might be needed for gaining sustained jobs (e.g. better-quality ones higher up in the labour market).

Also the *low pay offered by these jobs was not mentioned as a barrier to employment* (in any straightforward sense). In fact, we were struck by the number of times in these interviews (and in interviews with people who took them) that jobs offering the NMW were described as offering not ‘low pay’ but ‘good’ or ‘fair’ pay.

Overall, these support agencies mainly (and perhaps understandably) *concentrated their efforts on the supply-side of the employability equation* (i.e. on personal characteristics said to limit the getting and keeping of jobs). They predominantly focused on moving people ‘from welfare to work’ with much less attention to job retention and advancement. Some agencies had, however, been involved with the government’s Local Employment Partnership (LEP) programme and supported the beliefs that more aftercare is needed once people go into job and that employers need to do more to encourage job retention. With the LEP we heard of some good examples of employers being sympathetic to those from disadvantaged priority groups, including the long-term unemployed and single parents. We also heard from

one agency that, since the onset of national economic recession, the role of employers in the LEP had been 'watered down' and that it was an 'elusive beast at the moment'. Some support agencies pointed to the *impact of the recession on their ability to help people into work*. One interviewee asked: 'What's the point of aspiring [sic] people if the jobs aren't there?'

The *gendered nature of local employment opportunities* featured strongly in employer and agency interviews, with job vacancies concentrated in female-dominated sectors such as retail, call-centre and care work. Some of the smaller employers, who did not have politically polished rhetoric on staffing, were open about their discrimination in favour of female – and older – workers. The manager of a local café noted that 'all the staff are women, obviously ... they're better at cleaning and cooking', whilst the owner of a corner shop explained her preference for middle-aged workers: 'young people are thick and not interested in working'. Conversely, larger firms described relatively progressive staffing policies (e.g. recruiting from the local unemployed and those with criminal records). We suspect this reflects, to some extent, the truth of the matter and not just more politically and legally attuned understandings of what to say in interviews about employment practices. Larger firms could also be distinguished from smaller ones by the emphasis they placed (in interviews) on their positive terms and conditions of employment (e.g. 'family friendly' working hours, staff training) compared with the negative ones sometimes admitted by small firms (e.g. long hours for low pay). Neighbourhood of residence was only reported once as a specific aspect of employment discrimination (i.e. the 'postcode effect'): perhaps reflecting the multiplicity and predominance of deprived neighbourhoods in this town.

*Problems with services* also commonly featured in the barriers listed by support agencies. Foremost was lack of affordable, flexible, local childcare (e.g. that fitted non-standard working hours and non-regular incomes). A lack of accessible public transport was often raised, echoed by Lucas *et al.* (2008) who found transport was a crucial barrier for people seeking a job. That said, several small employers stressed a strong preference for local – sometimes very local – workers. A care home manager typically employed people who lived within half a mile and the manager of a social club sought to give bar jobs to people (only women) who lived on 'this part of the estate'.

The complexities of the benefit system were also mentioned frequently by support agencies as a barrier to employment. Usually they did not mean that over-generous benefit payments dissipated a willingness to work but that the relative 'security' of welfare benefits in meeting living costs (particularly for housing) was not matched by the insecure and relatively low-paying work available. People could often not find work that enabled them as easily and securely to meet basic living costs, they said. Additionally, the acknowledged bureaucratic difficulties of re-establishing benefit claims after the loss of a job meant some agencies saw the benefits system as a barrier to employment.

In general terms, then, what employers and support agencies described in relation to local employment and the 'barriers' to accessing it was not dissimilar from what local residents said (as described in Chapters 1, 2 and 3). There was some fit but not a perfect match between the *direct experiences* of these things and how they were described by employers and agencies.

One strong theme of the interviews with the latter did, however, clash directly with what we learned from those who were in low-paid jobs or currently jobless: that local unemployment could be explained by '*intergenerational unemployment*' wherein '*a culture of worklessness*' was learned in families and passed down generations. Interestingly, one story we heard concerned a young man who was forced to give up his job by his parents because they were not happy about him waking others in the household in the morning when he left for work. Even if this one such case is true, the fact that the exact same story was repeated to us by staff – across different organisations – is testament to the power of a particular ideological stance on worklessness that is deeply embedded within professional thinking. Such ideas rehearse discredited cultural underclass and culture of poverty theories and oddly jar with, and contradict, the other explanations of local unemployment given by the same practitioner interviewees. Crucially, they find no basis in fact in the lived experience of recurrent poverty, unemployment and low pay, according to the findings from this study.

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